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Thesis

FRANCIS THOMPSON: POET OF MYSTICISM

by

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"I hang 'mid men my needless head,
And my fruit is dreams, as theirs is bread:
The goodly men and the sun-hazed sleeper
Time shall reap, but after the reaper
The world shall glean of me, me the sleeper."
(From the Poppy)

Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., Poems of Francis Thompson, p. 9

Outline

Introduction

A. Poetry and Mysticism
  1. Contemplation
  2. Action
B. Objectives of Paper

Introduction

A. Poetry and Mysticism

"Every poet is a mystic, but not so every verse maker, even though a verse maker of genius. One would not look for mysticism in the verse of Voltaire."[1]

To distinguish between the mystic and the verse maker is to catch the feeling that the poet has risen to uncommon levels in the analysis of the inner spirit or soul. He has soared above and beyond the confines of the world, with his eye and intellect on a higher intangible Power. A power impossible to describe in the phraseology of any language. It is to know further, that such a person has suffered immeasureably, but throughout the many vicissitudes which beset mankind, hope has burned within his breast.

The Blessed Vision which he has beheld fills him with strength to scorn the materialism of the world about him. He stakes his all on the peace which he knows will be his when he and his Vision are one. Running through this inner raising of the spirit and intellect is the fine gold of religion acting as a reinforcement.

It is because we feel Francis Thompson was such a poet that we ascribe to him the term mystic; that term which has come to have such an enigmatic meaning.

1. Watkin, E. Ingram, "Dante and Mysticism," The Catholic World, September 1921, p. 829

1. Contemplation

Poetry and mysticism have one thing very much in common, and that is that they both belong to the field of contemplation.[1] Both the poet and the mystic are concerned with understanding the world but not necessarily with conquering it. The poet has no desire to harness the waterfall or rivulet from which he derives inspiration. Sufficient to him is it that these things fill his soul and being with the consciousness that the destiny of the heart is above and beyond them all and they are but the handmaidens of the God who made them. As Thompson expressed it:

> "Sing how the uncreated Light
> Moved first upon the deep and night
> And, at Its fiat lux,
> Created lights unfurled, to be
> God's pinions--stirred perpetually
> Influx and reflux."
> (from Carmen Genesis)[2]

The mystic likewise is cognizant that when he utters a prayer, a series of miracles will not transpire before his very eyes emanating from the God to whom he prays. His prayer is not touched by such a materialistic thought. Briefly speaking, for poet and mystic alike, it is the contemplation of the object or its use to some other thing that is the purpose of their being.[3]

1. White, Helen C., The Metaphysical Poets, p. 3
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., Poems of Francis Thompson, p. 189
3. White, Helen C., op. cit., p. 10

These ecstatic heights of contemplation are reached by the deepest meditation during which only the things of the spirit are of consequence and the soul finds internal peace. As such times is

"The earth reclining in a lull of power"
(from Contemplation)[1]

In such moments as these the poet

"-------round the solemn center of his soul
Wheels like a dervish, while his being is
Streamed with the set of the world's harmonies,
In the long draft of whatsoever sphere
He lists the sweet and clear
Clangour of his high orbit on to roll,
So gracious is his heavenly grace;
And the bold stars does hear
Everyone in his airy soar
For evermore
Shout to each other from the peaks of space
As 'thwart ravines of azure shouts the mountaineer."
(from Contemplation)[2]

2. Action

Poet and mystic are also alike in that neither remain passive. Very often it seems they must go down before a floodtide of experience, with

"-------the heart that knows its bitterness,"
("By Reason of Thy Law")[3]

but an inner force urges them on. They neither shrink nor fall before the impact of experience. There may be a momentary submission, but this is a selective surrender and

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 157
2. Ibid., p. 159
3. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J. op. cit., p. 158

is purely personal. For the most part they are desirous of actively sharing their experiences.[1] As Thompson put it:

> "From stones and poets you may know,
> Nothing so active is, as that which seems
> least so."
> (from Contemplation)[2]

Dr. Alexis Carrell says, "Christian Mysticism constituted the highest form of religious action."[3]

Poetry itself is a living thing, a spiritual thing. It is life--enhancing, provocative of fine emotions, for life in its highest sense is nothing but emotional activity. In this way poetry is creative and awakens enthusiasm in the reader to the point where it becomes part of the innermost being. Real poetry becomes part and parcel of the soul fibre. Likewise, the Visions, beheld through contemplation and expressed actively through poetry, insofar as it is possible to express such ecstatic experience in earthly language, are an integral part of the mystical poet.

B. Objective of Paper

It is the purpose of this paper to show that Francis Thompson was a true mystical poet. It will be seen that he heeded not the social, economic and literary revolutions of his times, but by contemplation and meditation raised his heart and soul above the confines of the world to a

1. White, Helen C., op. cit., p. 3
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 158
3. Jones, Rufus., The Flowering of Mysticism, p. 8

hidden, unseen Power. I shall define "Mysticism" and then follow through the poet's life showing that he adhered to this philosophy by his capacity for seeing in Nature and every phase of life about him, the pattern of an unseen Power. Extracts from his poetry will be cited proving that this inner consciousness completely permeates his writing making it very clear why he may be called "Francis Thompson: Poet of Mysticism."

Chapter I The History of Mysticism

A. What is Mysticism?

1. Definitions

Perhaps no word in the English language has been more thoroughly misrepresented and had more erroneous meanings attached to it than the word "mysticism." To the average person it has come to mean anything of a weird nature all the way from the trance experience to crystal gazing. Modern, material-minded people are so far removed from anything of a mystical nature that even an enlightened sector looks askance upon the matter. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1911) defines a mystic in the following manner: "one who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding, whence mysticism (often contempt)." From the addition of the words in parentheses we are brought face to face with the derisive construction which has been given the term. Of such widespread magnitude is this false interpretation that a dictionary as authoritative and balanced as the Oxford is forced to note that the whole meaning is often used contemptuously.

For a broader interpretation of mysticism we might consider the version set forth by Rufus Jones. He says

> "Mysticism is an attitude of the mind which comes into correspondence with a spiritual world-order that is felt to be as real as the visible one, is not confined to any race or any specific latitudes or longitudes. Its course is not primarily determined by geography or climate or pedigree. The moment the soul of man comes to itself, in any land or in any racial boundaries, centers down into its inward deeps, thins the insulating walls that made it seem to be a sundered self, and sensitively responds to the currents of deeper life that surround it, it finds its true element of being and lives joyously and thrillingly in the life of God. That is mystical life."[1]

Mysticism then is not an idea nor a philosophy, nor has it anything to do with magical experience. It is not merely the contemplation of Eternity. It is the act involving the perfect love of God. It is the art of establishing a union with the Absolute. It is final and personal. It is not an exterior experience disassociated from our being. To the contrary it is the very marrow of life.[2] Plotinus has called it, "the flight of the Alone to the Alone."[3]

2. Summary of findings

To sum up. Mysticism is a pattern of life which involves the constant all-absorbing consideration of Reality. It is a life of ultimates lived by renunciation and anti-materialism. It is a life motivated not by fear or punishment nor hope of reward but by the utter consciousness of,

1. Jones, Rufus M., op. cit., p. 210
2. Underhill, Evelyn, Mysticism, p. 98
3. Segar, G. M., "Alexandria and Mystical Writings of the Middle Ages," The Catholic World, August 1924, p. 505

and trust in, God. It is at once a living act of Love and Union in the Godhead. It is a life of contemplation in which is beheld the relationship between every existing form, and God Himself.

3. Contrast with Metaphysics

Because of their allied natures mysticism and metaphysics are very frequently misconstrued. Briefly stated, the difference between the two is that the metaphysician seeks to find the source of the causes of all things, whereas the mystic feels he knows the end of all things and sees all nature as a roadway unifying humanity to the One.[1]

4. Types of Mystics

"There are," says Plotinus, "different roads by which the apprehension of the Infinite may be reached. The love of beauty which exalts the poet; that devotion to the One and that ascent of science which makes the ambition of the philosopher; and that love and those prayers by which some devout and ardent soul tends in its moral purity towards perfection. These are the great highways conducting to the height above the actual and the particular, where we stand in the immediate presence of the Infinite, who shines out as from the deeps of the soul."[2]

1. Spurgeon, Caroline, Mysticism in English Literature, p. 13
2. Ibid., p. 33

a. Love and Beauty

Shelley and Browning might be cited as true examples of love-mystics. Both felt that Love was the stepping-stone between God and man. To the contrary Keats chose Beauty as the only way to seek Truth. This idea permeates his poetry.

> "Beauty is Truth, truth Beauty, that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."
> (from Ode on a Grecian Urn)[1]

b. Nature

Wordsworth of course, is the most outstanding exponent of the nature mystic that we have in English literature.

c. Philosophical

Tennyson has been cataloged as one of the representatives of the philosophical group.[2]

d. Religious

In the strict sense of the term all mystics are those who express themselves for the most part in the language of the Christian religion. They are so conscious of God that they seem to live in His very presence and approach him not by Love, Beauty or Nature but directly through renunciation and adoration. Richard Rolle and William Blake were such.

1. Campbell, Oscar, Pyre, J.F.A., Weaver, Bennett, Poetry and Criticism of the Romantic Movement, p. 593
2. Miller, George Morley, The Victorian Period, Introduction, p. lxi

In the Nominis Jesu Encomion of Rolle as quoted by Rufus Jones[1] we find:

> "I rane by the wantons of flesche and I fande noghte Jhesu. I satt in companyes of worldly myrthe and I fande noghte Jhesu. Therefore I turnede by another way and I rane abowte by poverte, and I fande Jhesu, pure borne in the world, laid in a crybe and lappid in clathes."

It was on such philosophy as this that Francis Thompson based his line of reasoning.

5. Imagery or Symbolism in Mysticism

a. Expressed through Metaphor and Simile

Both the poet and mystic regardless of the height of their flight to the Unseen are dependent upon the natural form of communication between men to express their thoughts. "Both in their effort to communicate the intangible, must appeal to material things, to those common counters of experience that lie between the speaker and the spoken-to in the sources of sense stimuli in the world about us."[2]

This they do by images expressed through metaphor and simile. An image roughly speaking, "-------is a little word picture used by a poet or prose writer to illustrate, illuminate and embellish his thought. It is a description or an idea, which by comparison or analogy, stated or understood with something else, transmits to us through the

1. Jones, Rufus, op. cit., p. 213
2. White, Helen C., op. cit., p. 19

emotions and associations it arouses, something of the 'wholeness', the depth and richness of the way the writer views, conceives or has felt what he is telling us."[1] The image then gives a clarity to thought which no description, regardless of how vivid or true, could do.

b. Prevalence of imagery in literature through the ages

There is nothing new under the sun and imagery in literature is no exception. A great deal of imagery is to be found in the Old Testament. Both the Book of Ecclesiastes and the Book of Deuteronomy are full of vivid imagery, the word pictures being drawn from the common things of every day life. God's care is likened to that of an eagle hovering over her fledglings; the fruits are likened to bitter poisonous grapes and the loosening hold of the people is like that of a mountain climber whose strength is failing.[2]

In the Christian era we may point out that Christ Himself makes use of nature imagery as revealed to us in the New Testament. He makes use of symbolism to draw an analogy between laws working in nature to the same law working in the spiritual world. There is the symbolism of the yearly harvest, the leaven in the loaf, the grain of mustard seed, the

1. Spurgeon, Caroline, Shakespeare's Imagery, p. 9
2. Brown, Stephen J., Rev. S.J., "Imagery in Literature," The Catholic World, January, 1928, p. 433

lilies of the field, the mystery of the wind--all of these are shown to contain a great and abiding truth.[1] The Greek Sophists used a great deal of extremely fanciful imagery in their writing. St. Augustine, who before his conversion was of the Sophist school, used the imagery of the arena, the theatre, the race course, the sea and ships to express his thought.

The Elizabethans perhaps more than any group since or before were most lavish in their use of imagery. They broke all bounds of conventionalized writing and let fancy roam at will. Their extremes ran all the way from vulgar extravagance to superb diction. It has been said that, "were no other means of information available we could gather from the metaphors of the drama that sports and amusements of all sorts were active and common in the life of the Elizabethan Englishman."[2]

c. Used as the medium of expression of the mystic

"Symbolism is of immense importance in mysticism; indeed symbolism and mythology are, as it were, the language of the mystic."[3] They are anxious to convey their ecstatic pleasures to others and because it is impossible to do this and yet use the common mode of expression, namely, language,

1. Spurgeon, Caroline, op. cit., p. 10
2. Brown, Stephen J., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 437
3. Spurgeon, Caroline, op. cit., p. 12

other means are employed. They draw upon the common objects of life, with which all are familiar and use these in the most fanciful ways. They draw analogies between the known and unknown endeavoring to make it easier for us to ascend their heights.

There are aesthetic people who grasp these analogies readily; for others it is much more difficult. It is difficult for many people to express in words any deep-seated emotion, and as Miss White points out there is no doubt but that mystical experiences of greater or lesser degree have come to many people, but they do not possess the poet mystic's great gift of unburdening the heart through language.[1]

Miss Spurgeon[2] using the words of R. L. Nettleship defines true mysticism as "The consciousness that everything which we experience, every 'fact,' is an element and only an element in the 'fact,' i.e. that in being what it is it is significant of something more."[3]

Every truth understood by finite intelligence must by its nature be a reflection of a deeper truth and by the aid of imagery or symbolism we are able to catch the glowing reflection which otherwise would be too obscure for us to apprehend.

1. White, Helen C., op. cit., p. 109
2. Spurgeon, Caroline, op. cit., p. 13
3. Ibid., p. 13

B. Brief history of Mysticism

1. In Europe

The history of mysticism on its speculative side is the history of an intellectual movement; on its effective side it is largely the story of the fluctuations in fervor of Christian peoples.[1] It is the intellectual movement which we shall consider historically and this same movement which we have in mind when hereafter we speak of mysticism.

In 146 B.C. when the Romans conquered the Greeks, the University of Athens, then representing the ultimate in the world of culture, established itself in Alexandria. Here at this university the Christian speculative mysticism founded by Plato, really began. Plato taught that men's souls were allied with the realm of some undefinable Eternal Reality.[2]

As time progressed, a notable figure around the University was Philo, a Jewish Platonist. He taught that whatever else might happen, the Messiah (who by now had actually come) would not take human form.

Toward the end of the first century and at about the time of Philo's death, Christianity was brought to Alexandria by St. Mark. By the end of the second century the Christian converts were quite numerous and in close

1. Jones, Rufus, op. cit., p. 28
2. Ibid., p. 28

touch with the learnings of the University. As a result of this mixing of ideas, many new schools of philosophy evolved based on Platonic type of reasoning. The philosophy of Plato appealed to the early Christians because it upheld so sternly the importance of the spiritual as against the material side of life. Chief among the contributors of philosophic thought at this time was Plotinus.[1]

Plotinus was born about 205 A.D. and died in Rome about 270. His theories play an extremely important part in the history of mysticism. In essence, Plotinus was the interpreter of Plato's teaching, but he refuted the existence of matter alone by an emphatic assertion of the existence of the spirit. He maintained that if the soul was spirit it could not emanate from the body, as the true source of reality is above, not beneath us. It is One, the Absolute, the Infinite. It is God. He further taught that God was all Good and Good like Light could diffuse itself. From God therefore flows intellect and from intellect the world of ideas. The pattern continues along the path of differentiation, down to Matter, the non-existant or antithesis to God. Plotinus taught that matter was unreal, that it was the source of evil, and whenever it was present there was no

1. Underhill, Evelyn, op. cit., p. 545

good. "God is reality. God alone is free from matter. God is spiritual."[1]

Man being composed of a body and a soul is therefore partly spiritual and partly material. The soul existed before birth and will continue to exist after death. "Knowledge is recollection,"[2] is the way Plato put it. It is therefore man's duty to free himself from the shackles of materialism in order that he may not be separated from God. Such did Plotinus decree. He suggested two ways by which man might return more quickly to God. The first was by withdrawing from the world in a purification process, which would eradicate the materialistic. The second was by an intellectual process. In this second method the soul rises to a contemplation beyond and above it and finally reaches to the contemplation of God Himself.

Plotinus differed from Plato in his greater asceticism and in his utter contempt for matter alone. He felt that man could never reach God by seeing Him Immanent in Nature alone. Likewise did Francis Thompson feel:

> "We are too near akin that thou shouldst cheat
> Me, Nature, with thy fair deceit."
> (from Sight and Insight)[3]

It is this Platonic stream of thought flowering through Plotinus which emerges and is known as Neoplatonism.[4]

1. Segar, G. M., op. cit., p. 644
2. Jowett, B., The Best Known Works of Plato, p. 379
3. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 158
4. Jones, Rufus M., op. cit., p. 27

Plotinus was converted to Christianity and his ecstatic doctrine was applied to supernatural mysticism and later with modifications became the basis of all mystical theology. He is recorded as being one of the world's greatest mystics. He is in the fullest sense the flower of European mysticism. He put the vision of God and union with Him as the goal of life for man.[1]

Greatest among early scholars who were influenced by Plotinus were St. Augustine (350-430 A. D.) and later St. Francis of Assisi 1182-1226. In his "Confessions," St. Augustine tells us that his whole mind and life were changed with the contact of Plotinus' teaching. "Thou procuredst for me, certain books of Platonists translated from Greek into Latin. I entered and with the eyes of my soul, saw above the same eye of my soul above my mind, the Unchangeable Light."[2] St. Francis' mysticism owed everything to Nature. He was the spontaneous and original expression of his personality, the rare personality of a poet of the Infinite. It showed itself in his few poems and above all in his life. He lived and walked literally in an enchanted world, with the Lady Poverty his sole companion.[3] He founded several religious orders, among them the Third Order which is divided

1. Jones, Rufus M., Ibid., p. 30
2. Pilkington, J. G., The Confessions of St. Augustine, p. 146
3. Allen, Hugh Anthony, "The Poet of the Return to God," The Catholic World, June, 1918, p. 292

into the Third Order Regular and the Third Order Secular. In the Third Order Secular the members are called Brethren of Penance or Franciscan Tertiaries. When asked to define the group St. Francis said, "I have been thinking for sometime to establish a third order in which persons living in the world may serve God in a perfect manner."[1]

It will be readily seen how these two great mystics came to have such influence upon Francis Thompson.

2. In England

Historians credit St. Augustine with the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon people.[2] Fragmentary as were the beginnings of his teachings, mystical writing grew and flourished in England for a brief span, reaching a peak in the 14th century with the great scholar Richard Rolle. From this time on however, there was a decline in mystical thought among the English, due, in a large sense to the reforms and heresies of the 16th century. This period of dearth was besprinkled with sporadic revivals and to one such in the 18th century we are grateful for the rise of the great mystic William Blake. Except for such occasional outbursts the great movement was temporarily inert and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were most apathetic. Ideas however

1. Father Ferdinand, Catechism of the Third Order of St. Francis, Chicago (no publisher given)
2. Marcham, Frederick, A History of England, p. 30

cannot be killed and to a student such as Thompson, who read deeply and intently into the past, the result was bound to show itself.[1]

1. Meynell, Everard, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 73

Chapter II The Times of Francis Thompson

A. The Nineteenth Century

The Nineteenth Century was a period of serious change and transition for the English people. This was due largely to the fact that the century was ushered in on the wave of a great revolution coupled with the weaknesses of a ruling dynasty.

> "Say, who is she
> With cloudy battle smoking round her feet,
> That goes out through the exit doors of death;
> And at the alternate limit of her path
> Where first her nascent footsteps troubled day,
> Forgotten turmoil curls itself away?
> Who is she that rose tumultuous?"
> (from The Nineteenth Century)[1]

Unfortunately for England, there sat upon the throne at the turn of the century, one of the weakest figures who ever held that seat of honor. George III has left little that historians of even broad view can record with zeal. He plunged England into the French Revolution when the country was in no condition either physically or mentally to endure war. In fact a large portion of the populace did not grasp its significance. They found themselves milling about, enmeshed in a French interpretation of Liberty (actually religious despotism) which the English mind neither welcomed nor comprehended. George III's few loyal supporters could

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev.S.J., op. cit., p. 245

plead insanity for his actions but no such plea could be made for George IV whose moral aberrations caused more havoc than insanity could have wrought. The effect of this revolution cast its shadow over the entire century like a giant umbrella and every move and reform within the period was to feel the chilling breath of that gigantic shadow.

1. Reforms

After the battle of Waterloo, England settled down to her domestic problems and began a period of reform. The common people of the country would have welcomed reform of any kind. The great Industrial Revolution had caused much suffering and hardship due to the mechanization of almost every type of hand operation in industries.

a. Social

People were thrown out of work by the hundreds and these ranks of unemployed were augmented by returning soldiers. Abuses were allowed to creep in which could have been averted. Child labor reached alarming proportions. Marcham in his History of England tells us that the ratio of men to children employed in industry during this period was approximately one to three.[1]

b. Economic

1. Marcham, Frederick G., op. cit., p. 713

People flocked to such great manufacturing centers as Manchester and in these cities their living standards were kept pitifully low.[1] They lived in poverty and squalor, and conditions in certain sections defy description. The working classes were distinctly marked from other people. Added to this they were taxed unmercifully. The tedium of their work coupled with conditions under which they lived, naturally brought out the worst in human nature, and riot and rebellion ran rampant. So loudly did the people raise their voices that finally in 1832 a series of reform bills was put through parliament to alleviate the tax-burden and secure better housing conditions for the laborer.

We could not better describe how totally science beset England than to quote from Francis Thompson's The Nineteenth Century:[2]

"Her heart she gave
To the blind worm that bores the mold,
Bloodless, pertinacious, cold,
Unsweeting what itself upturns,
The seer and prophet of the grave.
It reared its head from off the earth
(Which gives it life and gave it birth)
And placed upon its eyeless head a crown,
Thereon a name writ new,
'Science,' erstwhile with ampler meanings known;
And all the peoples in their turns
Before the blind worm bowed them down.
Yet, crowned beyond its due
Working dull way by obdurate, slow degrees
It is a thing of sightless prophecies;

1. Cooke, John D., "Minor Victorian Poets," Introduction p. viii
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 246

And glories, past its own conceit;
Wait to complete
Its travail, when the mounded time is meet."

c. Religious

Science and religion have always been the motivating forces in men's lives. If science oversteps and transgresses the moral welfare of man, repercussions of every sort follow. Most often these are in the field of religion. This period was no exception. Chief among the religious reactions at this time was the Oxford Movement.[1] This was an attempt by a group of Oxford University teachers to arouse the Churches from the apparent lethargy into which they had settled. The sermons of these men took the form of "tracts" in which they stressed the sovereignity of God and the authority of Christianity. It was not an attempt to frame a new religion but to praise and reassert the value of the old in these days when men seemed to be worshipping material advancement. It was Newman who led this group, he "who took down the iron sword of dogma to parry a blow not yet delivered that was coming from Charles Darwin."[2]

About the middle of the century (1859) Darwin published his, "The Origin of Species," and again men's minds were thrown into confusion and doubt. His pronouncements were

1. Marcham, Frederick G., op. cit., p. 713
2. Chesterton, Gilbert K., The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 38

startling and attacks and opposition were felt from every source. Many people thought he was attacking the ultimate guiding force of life, God Himself. People might have been easily swept away by Darwin's philosophy or any other reactionary idea which presented itself because in periods of oppression and strife how true it is that:

"All can feel the God that smites,
But ah, how few the God that loves!"
(from Heaven and Hell)[1]
New Poems

d. Art

To show the totality of the social upheaval we reflect briefly on the field of Art. It needed only unrest among the artists to cut from under the poets their last remaining source of stabilized inspiration. Such came all too soon.

While science and religion were raising their voices a band of poet artists led by Dante Gabriel Rosetti grouped together to establish reform in the field of art. The Brotherhood of Pre-Raphaelites was organized in 1842. Whereas the Oxford Group had urged a return to basic, simple truths in religion, the artists wished a return to the simplicity of the early painters. They wished more attention be given to Nature and its detail in imitation of Raphael.

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 247

2. Effect on literary thought

a. The times reflected

It is only logical to assume that in such a revolutionary period as just described, the writing of the period would be affected. When such fundamentals as religion, science and art are in a state of turmoil, the reflection takes place in literature. This is true when we consider that any literature, be it prose or poetry, is the mirror which reflects mens' lives. True, no revolution in the bloody sense took place in England, but nevertheless the country was full of revolutionary ideas. What had been war in France became in England a literary revolt. "No period was ever more favorable to the development of hypocrisy and fanaticism and those who suffered most were the country's greatest authors."[1]

b. Bulwarks tottering

They suffered because they could find nothing solid or firm on which to base their thought. They had become imbued with the idea that the bulwarks of religion and art on which they always had depended, were tottering. They suffered because each in expressing what he thought to be Truth was refuting what had been said by someone

1. Brandeis, George, Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature, Vol. IV, p. 16

else and the result was that in their search for the Answer they became divided into antagonistic groups. It is a sad commentary on any age to find its intellectual life stooping to pettiness.

Chesterton emphasized and summed up the national tempo when he said:

> "It is a disgrace to a man like Carlyle when he asks the Irish why they do not bestir themselves and reforest their country; saying not a word about the soaking up of every profit by the landlords which made that and every other Irish improvement impossible."[1]

England has been accused in the past of being too avaricious and Thompson was cognizant of this error:

> "Yet let it grieve, grey Dame,
> Thy passing spirit, God wot,
> Thou wast half-hearted, wishing peace, but not
> The means of it. The avaricious flame
> Thou'st fanned, which thou should'st tame;
> Cluck'dst thy wide brood beneath thy mothering plumes.
> And coo'dst them from their fumes,
> Stretched necks provocative, and throats
> Ruffled with challenging notes;
> Yet all did'st mar,
> Flattering the too-much-pampered Boy of War."
> (from The Nineteenth Century)[2]

> As Chesterton further said, "It is a disgrace for a man like Ruskin when he says, with solemn visage, that building in iron is ugly and unreal, but that the weightiest objection is because that there is no mention made of it in the Bible. It is a disgrace for a man like Thackeray when he proposes that people should be forcibly prevented from being nuns, merely because he has no fixed intention of becoming a nun. It is a disgrace for a man like

1. Chesterton, Gilbert K., op. cit., p. 158
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 249

> Tennyson, when he talks of the French Revolution, that huge crusade which had re-created the whole of his civilization, as being no graver, 'than a school boy's barring out.' It is a disgrace to a man like Browning to make spiteful puns about the names Newman and Wiseman. It is a disgrace to a man like Dickens, when he makes a blind brute and a savage out of St. Dunstan; it sounds not like Dickens but Dombey."[1]

It is not to be thought for one moment that this was the general trend of these great minds. Not at all. It simply shows the state of confusion into which even the literati were thrown in the all absorbing search for Truth as the way out of a maelstrom.

3. Resultant trends in poetry

The social changes and confusion emanating from the large cities rankled in many people and they sought to stem the tide. The chaotic condition which followed in the wake of scientific revolution and which established itself in the form of slum conditions and child labor was foreign to English thought.

To understand more clearly why it was so difficult for the English to accept the many changes thrust upon them let us consider these people briefly.

They have always been a people of the out-of-doors. They are strongly insular. They have always revelled at the sight of the sea. They have always enjoyed walking through

1. Chesterton, Gilbert K., op. cit., p. 158

what to them is the most beautiful countryside in the whole world:

"Let thy vales make haste to be more green
Than any vales are seen
In less auspicious lands,
And let thy trees clap all their leafy hands;
And let thy flowers be gladder far of hue.
Than flowers of other regions may;
Let the rose, with her fragrance sweetened through,
Flush as young maidens do,
With their own inward blissfulness at play.
And let the sky twinkle an eager blue
Over our English isle
Than any other where;
Till strangers behold, and own that she is fair."
(Francis Thompson from Ode on Queen Victoria)[1]

It is not surprising then that Wordsworth chose as his way back to stability the path of Nature. He felt that in the prosaic way of life of the large cities, to which men had flocked, they had forgotten this prime good, and social upheaval was the punishment.[2]

a. Naturalism

He has been called "the poet of the return to Nature"[3] and it is in this return we find the beginnings of Naturalism. In this philosophy the poets drew upon the highest tenets of their imaginations and associated Truth and Beauty with every form of nature surrounding them. With Wordsworth it became a creed and he developed pantheistic tendencies. Only a person who worshipped Nature with a

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 242
2. Brandeis, George, op. cit., p. 32
3. Moynihan, Florence, "Francis Thompson's 'An Anthem of Earth'", The Catholic World, April, 1917, p. 58

religious fervor could have written lines such as are found in Tintern Abbey:[1]

> "-------and this prayer I make
> Knowing that Nature never did betray
> The heart that loved her."

Francis Thompson has been compared to Wordsworth but how different was Thompson's view toward Nature! While Wordsworth considered her the Ultimate, Thompson believed her to be a handmaiden and quite inadequate to wholly satisfy the spiritual longings of the heart and soul:

> "Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
> I laid my own to beat,
> And share commingling heat;
> But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart.
> In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.
> For ah! we know not what each other says;
> These things and I; in sound I speak----
> Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.
> Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;
> Let her, if she would owe me,
> Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me
> The breasts o' her tenderness;
> Never did any milk of hers once bless
> My thirsting mouth.
> (from The Hound of Heaven)[2]

In his essay "Nature's Immortality," Thompson expresses the same thought:

> "You speak and you think you hear the throbbing of her heart, and it is the throbbing of your own. I do not believe Nature has a heart; and I suspect like many another beauty, she has been credited with a heart because of her face."[3]

1. Campbell, O.J., Pyre, J.F.A., Weaver, Bennett, op. cit., p. 111
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 79
3. Thompson, Francis, The Works of Francis Thompson, Part III, p. 80

This is true of course only when people substitute pantheism for love of God.

The ability to see and feel the sublimity of Nature is common to both poets but Wordsworth considered her the Absolute:

"And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And then round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects, of all thought,
And rolls through all things."
(from Tintern Abbey)[1]

Francis Thompson knew she merely did God's will:

"Hope not of Nature, she nor gives nor teaches;
She suffers thee to take
But what thine own hand reaches
And can itself make sovereign for thine ache.
Ah, hope her not to heal
The ills she cannot feel,
Or dry with many businessed hand the tear
Which never yet was weak
In her unfretted eyes, on her uncarked cheek.

O heart of Nature, did man ever hear
Thy yearned for word, supposed dear?----
His pleading voice returns to him alone;
He hears no other tone.

For know, this Lady Nature thou has left,
Of whom thou fear'st thee reft,
This Lady is God's Daughter, and she lends
Her hand but to His friends,
But to her Father's friends the hand thou would'st win;
Then enter in,
And here is that which shall for all make mends.
(from Of Nature: Laud and Plaint)[2]

1. Campbell, O.J., Pyre, J.F.A., Weaver, Bennett, op. cit., p. 111
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 256

Wordsworth and Coleridge were not only contemporaries but they were close personal friends during many years of their lives.[1] Coleridge had much more of the philosophy of the supernatural than his friend but they enjoyed the same intellectual equanimity which came from their common love of Nature. At times Coleridge's artistic expression would go off into the realm of fantasy, and the stern reality of Wordsworth would prove a stabilizing force. Wordsworth could never have written The Rime of the Ancient Mariner! This same Coleridge made deep impressions on Francis Thompson and we have no better proof of this fact than Thompson's own words;----

> "Coleridge was my favorite poet, but I early recognized that to make him a model was like trying to run up a window pane, or to make clotted cream out of moonlight or to pack jelly-fish in hampers."[2]

His admiration for Coleridge would be heightened by the fact that Coleridge too, deeply admired St. Francis, of whom Coleridge wrote:

> "Not Shelley, not Wordsworth himself, ever drew so close to the heart of Nature as did the Seraph of Assisi who was close to the heart of God."[3]

b. Romanticism

About the time Wordsworth and Coleridge were

1. Brandeis, George, op. cit., p. 86
2. Thompson, Francis, op. cit., p. 182
3. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 76

settling down into stodgy reactionaries of old age, three young giants appeared on the horizon, who, in a space of a few years were to alter considerably the literary picture. Byron, Shelley and Keats were of the school of naturalism but they did not adopt the exact philosophy of their elder brethren. Theirs was a highly imaginative Romantic love of nature and they were absorbed in the philosophy of the Beauty of all natural phenomena. Here Thompson would take exception:

> "The impitiable Daemon
> Beauty, to adore and dream on
> To be
> Perpetually
> Hers, but she never his."
> (from To The Dead Cardinal of Westminster)[1]

In matters of politics and religion the trio was extremely radical. In fact, Shelley was expelled from Oxford for writing a tract entitled, "The Necessity of Atheism."[2] So extremely revolutionary were they that they earned for themselves the title of rebels; adverse public opinion drove Byron and Shelley from England and they died on foreign soil. In spite of their apparent unpopularity this trio wrote some of the most beautiful lines in English poetry and they have left a mark on the pages of English literature never to be erased.

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 94
2. Campbell, J.A., Pyre, J.F.A., Weaver, Bennett, op. cit., p. 391

"Before Coleridge," Francis Thompson continues, "Shelley had been my favorite poet."[1] He admired the Shelleyan love of Nature but not the same carried to a religious fervor. He admired the airy, ethereal, cloudlike qualities and above all the childlike abandon with which Shelley handled everything found in Nature. We see this from his discussion an "Essay on Shelley:"

> "Shelley was the child, still at play, though his play things were larger. The universe is his box of toys. He dabbles in the sunset. He is gold-dusty with tumbling amid the stars. He makes bright mischief with the moon. He teases into growling the kennelled thunder and laughs at the shaking of its fiery chain. He dances in and out of the gates of Heaven. He runs over the fields of ether. He chases the rolling world. He gets between the feet of the horses of the sun. He stands in the patient lap of nature and twines her loosened tresses after a hundred wilful fashions, to see how she will look nicest in poetry."[2]

With true Franciscan charity Francis Thompson forgave Shelley for the things which caused many epithets to be hurled at him by English critics. In Buona Notte he speaks very touchingly of the lyricist whom he so deeply admired and to whom he has been compared:

> "Ariel to Miranda:--Hear
> This good-night the sea-winds bears
> And let thine unacquainted ear
> Take grief for their interpreter."[3]

c. Realism

1. Thompson, Francis, op. cit., p. 37
2. Thompson, Francis, "Shelley," p. 15
3. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 111

"The Moving Finger writes; and having writ, Moves on,"[1] and we come to the Victorian era. The supreme task of the period was the synthesis of the ideal and the real.[2] The preceding age had been a highly romantic one and the sages of the new period saw fit to interpret things as they really existed in the past and present. Hence we have the new Realism. The representative names all will recognize as belonging to the period are Browning, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. They reflect the general attitudes of the period.

Browning accepted science, accepted evolution and was never troubled:

> "Browning went
> With shrewd looks and intent,
> And meditating still some gnarled theme."
> (from Ode to Queen Victoria)[3]

He had superb optimism, and in his confident and glad welcome to science, he stands almost alone among poets.[4]

Tennyson is more nearly representative of the average Victorian in connection with the world of science. He was admired by men of science for the eagerness with which he accepted every scientific discovery. His work reflects the scientific and social movements of the age. The discoveries and inventions of the times he translated into poetry. While

1. Cooke, John D., op. cit., p. 65
2. Miller, George Morley, op. cit., p. 73
3. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 240
4. Miller, George Morley, op. cit., Introduction p. lxxii

he felt that the world would move forward rapidly by means of the scientific evolution he did not wish to divorce it from religion. A deeply religious spirit pervaded his works. His overview of the world revealed a belief that even the tiniest blossom owed its existence to a Divine Being. In the tremendous conflict which grew out of an effort to establish a reconciliation between religion and science, Tennyson stood forth as a leader.[1]

Matthew Arnold stood for the spirit of intelligence in his time. He wished to create within people a respect for ideas. Like the naturalists who preceded him he found in Nature a refuge from Life--an escape. However, Nature as she appeared to Arnold was a means to an end and his belief did not savor of even the mildest Pantheism.

There were other Victorians--"minor names of major importance,"[2] as Chesterton tells us, but because they did not attach themselves to any particular school which dominated the era, because they went along the even tenor of their way, these major-minors have been relegated to a comparatively obscure place. It is unfortunate for us that such is true because among them were genii and artists and no less a genius and artist than Francis Thompson.

1. Warner, Charles Dudley, Library of the World's Best Literature, Vol. 25, p. 14,586
2. Chesterton, Gilbert K., op. cit., p. 201

Chapter III Thompson, the Man

A. His family

Francis Joseph Thompson was born at Preston in Lancashire in 1859, the second son of Dr. Charles Thompson and his wife, Mary Turner Morton. Both Dr. and Mrs. Thompson were converts from Anglicanism, being among the first to be influenced by the Oxford Movement.

Shortly after Francis' birth, the family moved to a suburb of Manchester, and there his early youth was spent amid the forest of smoking tunnels of England's huge industrial district. The background was not a lovely one, a circumstance that Francis noted very early in life.[1]

1. Father

Dr. Thompson is recorded as being an extremely kind man. He lived an exemplary life and stood in fear and respect of the Creator. He had two brothers, Edwary Healy Thompson and Reverend Henry Thompson, both of whom were educated at Oxford, and both of whom wrote verse. Their writing was of such mediocrity however, that neither could be credited with supplying the cue to the origin of Francis' muse.

2. Mother

It was Francis' custom to speak of his mother, as if it was from her as much as it was his father, that he derived

1. Alexander, Calvert, Rev., S.J., The Catholic Literary Revival, p. 151

certain mental and physical characteristics. She belonged to a good English family, her father being a bank clerk, and she herself, a governess.[1]

B. The Child

At the age of 7 years Francis was reading poetry. A housemaid remembers him atop the ladder in the book cupboard, surrounded by books far beyond his years. So absorbed was he that he became totally oblivious to her calls to meals.[2] It was at this tender age that he found his way into the hearts of Shakespeare and Coleridge. To be sure he knew not the meaning of what he read but the feeling of poetry overwhelmed him.

> "I understood love in Shakespeare," he himself says of this period, "which I connected with the lovely long-tressed women of F. C. Selous' illustrations to Cassell's Shakespeare, my childish introduction to the supreme poet. These girls of floating hair I loved; I admired the long-haired beautiful youths of early English history. Shakespeare I had always tried to read for the benefit of my sisters and the servants; both kicked against Julius Caesar as dry--though they diplomatically refrained from saying so. Comparing the pictures of Medieval women with the crinolined and chignoned girls of my own day, I embraced the fatal but undoubting conviction that beauty expired somewhere about the time of Henry VIII. I believe I connected that awful catastrophe with the Reformation (merely because, from the pictures, and to my taste, they seem to have taken place about the same time)."[3]

1. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 5
2. Alexander, Calvert, Rev., S.J., op. cit., p. 157
3. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 10

With his mother and sisters, his books and his own inventions, he was, at this time, happy. He would give entertainments to a more or less patient and tolerant audience of sisters; a model theatre on whose stage he would dangle marionettes was one of his favorite performances. He was grateful for this occupation and amusement to the end of his life.

It was in these early days that he became, to use his own words, "expert in concealment, not expression of, myself. Expression I reserved for my pen. My tongue was tenaciously disciplined in silence."[1] Later he was to write:

> "As anguish for supreme expression prest,
> Borrows its saddest tongue from jest,
> Thou hast of absence so create
> A presence more importunate;
> And thy voice pleads its sweetest suit
> when it is mute.
> I thank the once accursed star
> which did teach
> To make of Silence my familiar,
> Who hath the rich reversion of thy speech
> Since the most charming sounds thy thought can
> wear,
> Cast off, fall to that pale attendant's share;
> And thank the gift which made my mind
> A shadow-world, where through the shadows wind
> Of all the loved and lovely of my kind."
> (from Sister Songs Part II)[2]

1. Education

Thompson's father and mother had destined him for the priesthood, and in 1870 sent him to Ushaw College, just

1. Ibid., p. 10
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev., S.J., op. cit., p. 44

outside Durham where he remained for seven years. Here he excelled in English. In fact, so good was his written work that one of the masters wrote Dr. Thompson to the effect that Francis' compositions were the best productions from a boy of his age that he had ever seen in the school.

He never appeared to be rugged physically and kept much to himself. He did not join in the games with other boys and seemed happiest when alone. Much of his free time was spent in the college chapel. There were youngsters at Ushaw when he was there whose tendencies seemed to be along similar lines, but they too were shy, and backward and the result was that they who might have shared much, never knew each other. Among these was Henry, the son of Coventry Patmore.[1]

That Thompson early in life was concerned with higher things and that his being held the seed which was later, to blossom into full poetic flower, is evidenced by lines found in his old manuscript books. These were the joys which were hid during recreation hours:

> "Think, my Soul, how we were happy with it in days of yore,
> When upon the golden mountains we saw throned the mighty Sun,
> When the gracious Moon at nighttime taught us deep and mystic lore,
> And the holy wise old forests spoke to us and us alone.
>
> Yes, I loved them! And not least I loved to look on ocean's face,

1. Ibid., p. 18

When he lay in peace sublime and evenings'
shades were stealing on,
When his child, the King of Light, from Heaven
stooped to his embrace,
And his locks were tangled with the golden
tresses of the Sun."[1]

There were many beautiful meadows and hedgerows around Ushaw and through these he walked and tramped, gathering early in life his knowledge of Nature:[2]

"The laden laburnum stoops
In clusters gold as thy hair
The maiden lily droops.
The fairest where all are fair,
The thick-mossed fuchsias show
In red and in white--thy hue!
In a pendant cloud they spread and glow,
Of crimson and white and blue,
In hanging showers they droop their flowers,
Of crimson and white and crimson and blue."

Of all the adjustments to be made at Ushaw that of moral discipline seemed to spell defeat. It was not that Francis deliberately wished to disobey the rules nor was he rebellious; the sum and substance of it all was that he was every inch of him, a dreamer of the dreams of the Unseen.

"The hardest pang whereon
He lay his mutinous head maybe a Jacob's stone.
In the most iron crag his foot can tread
A Dream may strew her bed,
And suddenly his limbs entwine,
And draw him down through rock as sea-nymphs might
through brine.
But, unlike those feined temptress-ladies who
In guerdon of a night the lover slew,
When the embrace has failed, the rapture fled,
Not he, not he, the wild sweet witch is dead!

1. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 58
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., Introduction, p. xvii

And though he cherisheth
The babe most strangely born from out her death,
Some tender trick of her it hath, maybe,--
It is not she!
(from Sister Songs Part II)[1]

He made resolutions which he sincerely meant to keep. That he even dwelt on the punishments of his indolence is attested to by the judgments written in large letters found scribbled in old books:

"Thou wilt not lie abed when the last trump blows. Thy sleep with the worms will be long enough."[2]

However, the rising bell which he thought he was answering most often turned out to be the dinner bell.[3]

His teachers were most kind and sympathetic with this flaw, if it may be called such, in his character. Finally, it grew so bad that in 1877 the President of the school was forced to write Dr. Thompson telling him that his boy's indolent qualities were of such a nature it would be inadvisable for him to become a priest. This was a bitter blow to Thompson, as indeed it was for his family. His father immediately decided he should study medicine but Francis, realizing the ambition of his life was frustrated, resolved mentally <u>not</u> to be a doctor. He who long years before had learned the art of silence said, "If I cannot be a priest, then I will be a writer."[4]

1. Ibid., p. 41
2. Alexander, Calvert, Rev., S.J., op. cit., p. 152
3. Ibid., p. 156
4. Ibid., p. 153

2. Medical School

In 1877 Francis Thompson entered upon the study of medicine at Owens' College in Manchester. He never showed aptitude in the studies allied to medicine and much less did they appeal to him now presented as they were through the materialistic echo of Darwin. The result was he absented himself from classes at regular intervals and spent such stolen time in the public galleries and libraries pursuing his inherent bent.[1]

a. Illness and laudanum

In 1879 after two years at Owens College, Francis took sick and was ill an interminable length of time with fever. In consequence he first tasted laudanum. About this same time his well-intentioned mother gave him a copy of De Quincy's The Confessions of an English Opium Eater. The importance of this volume in formulating the habit which later was to cause him so much misery, cannot be overestimated. His biographer Everard Meynell, exhorts the reader to read in part, at least, The Confessions, "for without the mighty initiation of that masterly prose, the gateways into the strange and tortuous landscape of dreams can hardly be forced."[2]

He had a frail, delicate physique possessing incipient tuberculosis which made him more susceptible to drugs than a

1. Ibid., p. 156
2. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 154

person of stronger vitality. Add to this the fact of his pursuing studies for which he had no calling and all of it in the city of Manchester which De Quincy had labelled "a den of the iniquity of opium,"[1] and we should not be too severe in our criticism.

b. Failure

Six years of study ended in failure when he was unsuccessful in the medical examinations in 1884. His father was extremely chagrined by this and a bitter family scene resulted. It seemed futile to try to offer an explanation to what seemed a hopeless state of affairs. After cogitating briefly on the inevitable he quietly slipped away from home.

1. Ibid., p. 39

Chapter IV Thompson, the Poet

A. London

1. Poverty

When Francis Thompson arrived in London his worldly possessions consisted of a copy of Blake's poems in one pocket and the plays of Aeschylus in the other.

2. The streets

This was in 1885. It was not an adventure; he had not wanted to leave home. He was friendless and penniless and tramped the streets seeking employment. These were the streets of which he was to write later:

> "Think of it. If Christ stood amidst your London slums and streets he could not say, 'Except you become as one of these little children.' Far better your children be cast from the bridges of London, than that they should become as one of those little ones. Could they be gathered together and educated as to cut off future recruits from the ranks of Darkest England; then it would need no astrology to cast the horoscope of tomorrow. La tête de l'homme du peuple, nay rather de l'enfant du peuple--around that sways the conflict. Who grasps the child grasps the future."[1]

Hunger and want forced him to engage in all sorts of menial jobs in London and he picked up a few pennies here and there as newsvendor, bootblack, carriage caller and as a common beggar. He slept where he could; sometimes this was in the Refuge for homeless men and sometimes it was on

1. Thompson, Francis, op. cit., p. 64

the London Embankment huddled under the protecting arches of the great bridge.

It was in the 90's that night life of the large cities first began to take shape and there were those who considered the whole urban debacle one of romance and adventure. There was no beauty in Thompson's London. He had witnessed industrialism gone mad in the heart of Manchester. At that time he was able to flee to the safety of his home. There was no such retreat now. Of this London he said in reviewing Booth's In Darkest England:

> "----------it is a region whose hedgerows are set to brick, whose soil is chilled to stone; whose flowers are sold and women; where the men wither and the stars; whose streets to me on the most glittering days are black. For I unveil their secret meanings. I read their human hieroglyphs. I diagnose from one hundred occult signs the disease which perturbs their populous pulses. We regret the smoke of London; it were nothing without the fumes of congregated evil."[1]

Once during these London nights of nightmare he met a girl of the streets who rescued him when he had been hit by a passing cab. She was willing to share with him her scanty fare but she was quick enough to see in him a person far removed from his proper environment; she was also, strong enough to flee from him, disappearing into the London blackness. He never encountered her again. He never forgot her

1. Ibid., p. 52

kindness and paid tribute to her in a mystical manner:

"Forlorn, and faint and stark
I had endured through watches of the dark
The abashless inquisition of each star,
Yea, was the outcast mark.
Of all those heavenly passers' scrutiny;
Stood bound and helplessly
For Time to shoot his barbed minutes at me;
Suffered the trampling hoof of every hour
In night's slow-wheeled car;
Until the tardy dawn dragged at me
From under those dreadful wheels; and bled of strength,
I waited the inevitable past
A child; like thee, a spring flower; but a flower
Fallen from the budded coronal of Spring,
And through the city-streets blown withering.
She passes,--O brave, sad, lovingest, tender thing!
And of her own scant pittance did she give,
That I might eat and live:
Then fled, a swift and trackless fugitive."
(from Sister Songs Part I)[1]

It must be emphasized that during all this period of trial by fire which Thompson endured, never did he once make a misstep to degrade himself morally or spot the purity of his character.

Of his fortitude Father Calvert says, "-----a distinction must be made between the manner of his familiarity with evil and that of Wilde, Dowson, or Verlaine. They knew by sinning; he by a method no less experimental and productive of compunction but without the same moral guilt. He tramped the crooked streets of London as did Dante descending the spirals to Hell, knowing all sins and participating in them by the consciouness that in himself were the seeds of all these <u>fleurs du mal</u>. It was this undoubtedly, that

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev., S.J., op. cit., p. 28

> enabled him later to rise to the higher terraces of the spiritual life while those who knew sin in another way remained below with only the heavy sense of guilt."[1]

B. The Meynells

1. The editor

In February 1877, Thompson assembled on odd bits of torn brown paper a manuscript he had been writing entitled, "Paganism." This, along with two poems, he forwarded to the editor of Merrie England. He sent a few pennies along with the manuscript requesting the editor address his reply to the Charing Cross Post Office.

The greasy soiled manuscript lay on Wilfred's Meynell's desk for months and then was read and admired by both the editor and his wife. They tried to contact the author at the given address but he, however, was enduring another floodtide of misfortune and could not be located. The Meynells finally decided to publish one of the poems in Merrie England, hoping he would see it and thus might they reach him. The plan was successful and shortly after this, Thompson wrote to them, giving as his address now, that of a chemist in Drury Lane where he bought narcotics. With the help of the proprietor he was located and taken to the editor's office.

1. Alexander, Calvert, Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 158

> "The door opened and the stranger came half in. The door closed, but he had not entered. Again it opened, again it shut. At a third attempt a waif of a man came in. No such figure had been looked for; ragged and unkempt, with no shirt beneath his coat and bare feet in broken shoes, he stood in silence."[1]

This is the way Wilfred Meynell describes his first meeting with the one who was later to become a veritable member of his family. Shy and reticent as always, he refused to tell Mr. and Mrs. Meynell the full extent of his poverty but they observed that over and above all else he was a sick man and they finally prevailed upon him to see a doctor. The diagnosis revealed that he had little time to live and should the opium be taken from him, the life, destined to be short at most, would be shortened.

2. Renunciation of drugs

The Meynells however decided otherwise, feeling that the drug habit must be cured. Consequently, they took it upon themselves to send him to a private hospital and then to the Praemonstratensian Priory at Storrington. Here in the company of the monks, he found himself, renounced drugs and celebrated his moral victory by writing, "Ode To The Setting Sun," one of his finest odes.[2] It was the first "conclusive sign of his genius,"[3] says his biographer.

1. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 69
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev., S.J., op. cit., Introduction, p. xxiii
3. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 75

It must be borne in mind that the "renunciation of opium, not its indulgence opened the doors of his intellect. Opium killed the poet in Coleridge; the opium habit was stifled at the birth of the poet in Thompson."[1]

C. Poetic Periods of his life

1. In 1888 Thompson sent "Paganism: Old and New" to the editor of Merrie England. Along with this essay he enclosed two poems Passion of Mary and Dream Tryst. These had been written at snatched periods during the times he tramped the London streets. They were written when he was enduring the most tortuous times of his life. These were the works, the worth of which were to win for him the admiration, love and friendship of two such loyal personages as Alice and Wilfred Meynell. A new period was awakening for him.[2]

> "So stood I, between a joy and fear,
> And said to mine own heart, 'now if the end be here.'"
> (from Sister Songs Part II)[3]

2. In 1893 was published Poems. These were the fruits of the years spent between the monastery at Storrington and the home of the Meynells. They reflect the new joy and peace which had come to him and the supreme delight which he enjoyed sharing the childish eagerness of the Meynell children.

1. Alexander, Calvert, Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 159
2. Ibid., p. 161
3. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 35

"Whom Heaven still leaves a twofold dignity,
As girlhood gentle, and as boyhood free;
With whom no most diaphanous webs enwind
The bared limbs of a rebukeless mind."
(from Sister Songs Part II)[1]

3. In 1895 Sister Songs was published. They were written at approximately the time of Poems. The Hound of Heaven likewise belongs to this period. In all his poetry there is a personal revelation, the shadow of experiences being the unseen force behind each poem. In Sister Songs is seen the experience itself; he refers to his nights spent in the streets of London. Many times throughout his poetry he tells of his nearness to despair and says:

"One stricken from his birth
with curse
Of destinate verse."
(from To the Dead Cardinal of Westminster)[2]

4. In 1897 came New Poems. They were written at the Capuchin Monastery, Pantasaph, Wales, where he went in 1894 after a four-year stay with the Meynells in London. Here he hoped for a complete renewal of his art because some of his imagery did not please him. Here at Pantasaph he met Coventry Patmore and a most devoted friendship developed and flourished between the younger poet and the formal, austere critic.

D. His death

1. Pantasaph

He returned to London from Pantasaph in 1897 and wrote

1. Ibid., p. 38
2. Ibid., p. 94

sporadically for the remaining ten years of his life. The type of writing during this time consisted mostly of journalistic treatises and reviews.

2. Hospital

Finally, on November 13, 1907 at the Hospital of St. John and St. Elizabeth he succumbed to the ravages of tuberculosis and was buried in St. Mary's Cemetery, Kensall Green, London.

E. His Popularity

1. Appraisal

Francis Thompson's poetry was not well received by the public even though many able critics extolled it. After the publication of Poems, Matthew Arnold wrote:

> "My belief is that Francis Thompson has a richer natural genius, a finer poetical equipment than any poet save Shakespeare. Show me the divinist glories of Shelley and Keats, even of Tennyson and I think I can match them all out of this one book, this little book that can be bought at an ordinary bookseller's shop for an ordinary prosaic crown."[1]

Coventry Patmore wrote in the Fortnightly Review concerning Poems:

> "Unlike most poets of his quality, who have usually had to wait a quarter of a century or more for adequate recognition, this poet is pretty sure of a wide and immediate acknowledgement. His abundant and often unnecessary obscurities will help his popularity, as Browning did his, by

1. Ibid., p. 110

> ministering to the vanity of such as profess to be able to see mill stones;--all are circumstances which will probably do more for his immediate acceptance by the literary public than qualities which ought to place him, even should he do no more than he has done, in the permanent ranks of fame, with Cowley and Crashaw."[1]

Francis Thompson's poetry is not such as would appeal to the masses. It is obscure, it is deep, and its profusion of imagery necessitates profound thought and concentration. It has the quality of deep and lasting friendship which does not burst into full bloom overnight but grows on one, becoming fresher and stronger with the years. This is no doubt the reason why in three years after the author's death the separate edition of The Hound of Heaven, sold fifty thousand copies, and later had a circulation in this form and in anthologies which is beyond calculation.[2] This is also doubtless why, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death in 1933, the "New York Times" said:

> "It is an evidence of the impression made in the literary world by Francis Thompson that the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death has evoked almost as many tributes as are commonly paid to the memory of a famous writer on his centenary."[3]

The London Times on the same occasion remarks that it is very significant that few of the poets of the 80's and 90's

1. Patmore, Coventry, "Mr. Francis Thompson, A New Poet," Fortnightly Review, January 1, 1894, p. 19
2. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 184
3. Alexander, Calvert, Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 150

are read today and yet:

> "Thompson has retained his hold upon the imagination of the younger generation. And this although some of the distinctive features of his verse his wealth of classical illusion, his exotic nealogisms, the deliberate richness of his diction--might be expected to jar painfully upon the susceptibilities of an age intolerant of mannerisms but its own. He has managed to survive because his work embodies the essential qualities which everywhere and in all ages are known as the mark of true poetry. For richness of imagination, for metrical skill and for sublimity of thought he is surpassed only by the great master poets of our language."[1]

2. Immediate present

In our own immediate present it is worthwhile to note that King George VI of England has quoted lines from Thompson in many of his speeches throughout the war, and the present Queen Elizabeth is a great admirer of the poet. Lines from "The Night of Forebearing," were quoted by Captain McEwen M.P. in an address given to the House of Commons, October 4, 1938.[2]

Doubtless these people feel, as we do, and as did his great friend, benefactor and biographer, Wilfred Meynell:

> "Let none be named the benefactor of him who gave to all more than any could give him. He made all men his debtors, leaving to those who loved him the memory of his personality, and to English poetry an imperishable name."[3]

1. Ibid., p. 151
2. Riley, Arthur A., The Boston Daily Globe, September 13, 1944, p. 13
3. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 206

Chapter V Thompson, the Mystic

A. Constancy

1. Antithesis to his times

We have seen that Francis Thompson came at the end of an era notable for being a most inconstant one. It witnessed a most definite and drastic change in its whole social and economic order. This of course is reflected in religion and literature:

> "Men were spiritually bored; religious life had become uninspiring. Historians began to look back upon the days that had been and saw in the dim past much beauty which they hoped would be restored in religious art and architecture and in a new vision in religious life generally. They saw spiritual beauty in the Middle Ages worth recapturing. It was clear something had disappeared from old England and it had been a great loss."[1]

A quick glance back shows the nineteenth century to be at best, one of bewilderment. True, much good evolved from the social reforms and the field of literature has given us treasures, but sometimes is not the price we pay for that dubious commodity Progress, rather high? Men's minds were in confusion and they doubted to the point of despair. Some searched for the answer and found it in Nature and Beauty but they were not wholly satisfied.

1. Williamson, Mary P., "The Nineteenth Century," The Nineteenth Century, February 1944, p. 342

2. Mystical teachings of predecessors

All this was a far cry from the mystical teachings of St. Augustine. His teachings were, we recall, a refutation of materialism, as set forth by Plotinus. Coming at the end of such a confused period it would be supposed that Thompson would have been caught in the tidal wave of materialism and doubt that swept over England. To the contrary he was able through the media of religion and the teachings of the Middle Ages, to escape the flood tide. By so doing he emerged unscathed spiritually:

> "Gird, and thou shalt unbind
> Seek not, and thou shalt find;
> To eat
> Deny thy meat;
> And thou shalt be fulfilled
> With all sweet things unwilled:
> So best
> God loves to jest."
> (from Any Saint)[1]

Thompson did not doubt nor was he sceptical. He

> "-----saw the Is beyond the Seems."
> (from The Singer Saith of His Song)[2]

Because of this he was not understood by many of his contemporaries. Some of the critics were extremely unkind to him. Robert Frost has said, "Poetry begins with a lump in the throat."[3] If this be true, Francis Thompson certainly

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 185
2. Ibid., p. 294
3. Haycroft, Howard and Kunitz, Stanley, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 503

came to know poetry in these days and suffered intensely because he refused to lose faith in a Divine Power. However, how could critical sceptics be expected to understand his deep humility? Above all, how could they understand his mountainous detail of mysticism? With Chesterton we agree that Francis Thompson was above and beyond his times.[1]

B. Follower of the Gleam

1. His spirituality

Francis Thompson was the true follower of the Gleam--the real slave of his own fair dreams. Thus did he embody the ideals of a true poet of mysticism.[2] His eyes were on things spiritual and never once did he deflect his glance.

He had the poet mystic's sense of supreme reality gained in moments of ecstatic insight, of which the phenomena of the world are mere transitory symbols.[3] It might be difficult to define or prove this reality with any degree of satisfaction to a sceptic but to Francis Thompson it needed no explanation:

> "O world invisible, we view thee,
> O world intangible, we touch thee,
> O world unknowable, we know thee,
> Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!
> (from the Kingdom of God)[4]

C. Influence of St. Francis Assisi and St. Augustine

1. 1. Chesterton, Gilbert K., op. cit., p. 204
   2. Bronner, Milton, "Francis Thompson: An Appraisement", Independent, January 1908, p. 99
   3. Armstrong, M. D., "The Poetry of Francis Thompson," Forum, November 1913, p. 725
   4. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 193

1. St. Francis

For the most part the significance of his great patron and namesake St. Francis of Assisi has been overlooked in books written on Francis Thompson. Of the many influences which helped to mold his character none are of more importance than that of the Franciscan Order of which he was a devout Tertiary.[1] As a tertiary he was a member of the Order of Penance, not only by profession but by circumstance. There were many moments during which he was forced to conjecture:

"The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the rind."
(from The Hound of Heaven)[2]

Yet in all his writing there is not one word of revolt, not one hint of rebellion against the law of God. There is a pessimism, but it is not the pessimism of John Davidson, nor the pessimism of Pantheism. It is a pessimism tinged with Hope.

"The fairest things in life are Death and Birth,
And of these two the fairer thing is Death
For there is nothing lives but something dies
And there is nothing dies but something lives.
Till skies be fugitives,
Till Time, the hidden root of change, updries
Are Birth and Death inseparable on earth;
For they are twain yet one, and Death is Birth."
(from Ode To The Setting Sun)[3]

1. Allen, Hugh Anthony, "The Poet of the Return to God," The Catholic World, June 1918, p. 292
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 80
3. Ibid., p. 83

Lines such as these are what caused him to be termed gloomy and morbid but only by people utterly void of spiritual insight. Are not the most of us quite convinced that Death is Birth? Thompson's keen analysis of such truths coupled with his resignation to the Divine Will are genuinely Franciscan.[1]

Like St. Francis, Francis Thompson accepted poverty as a means of salvation and also like St. Francis he felt that Pain, cheerfully accepted would win for us Paradise:

"Here I make oath--
Although the heart that knows its bitterness
Hear loathe,
And credit less--
That he who kens to meet Pain's kisses fierce
Which hiss against his tears,
Dread, loss, nor love frustrate
Nor all iniquity of the froward years
Shall his inured wing make idly bate,
Now of the appointed quarry his staunch sight
To lose observance quite;
Seal from his half-sad and all-elate
Sagacious eyes,
Ultimate Paradise;
Nor shake his certitude of haughty fate.
(from By Reason of Thy Law)[2]

And again,

"I witness call the austere goddess, Pain,
Whose mirrored image trembles where it lies
In my confronting eyes,
If I have learned her sad and solemn scroll:--
Have I neglected her high sacrifice
Spared my heart's children to the sacred knife
Or turned her customed footing from my soul?
Yea, thou pale Ashtaroth who rulst my life,
Of all my offspring thou hast had the whole."
(from Laus Amara Doloris)[3]

1. Allen, Hugh Anthony, op. cit., p. 295
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 159
3. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 227

Poems and New Poems were written in the companionship of the monks at Storrington and Pantasaph, respectively. The deep, internal Franciscan character of the man was heightened by his daily companionship with the gentle friars during these opportune periods of respite from a misunderstanding world. Mr. Allen quoting from Franciscan Days of Vigil, portrays a lovely picture of the poet's life among his,

> "Brothers and most dear Friends! The center of interest in the household was that of the poet, Francis Thompson, who spent the summer of that year in the cottage. The Franciscans had learned a kind of art of drawing their poetic quest into conversation. This was to introduce a subtle contradiction to his pet theories, which would in a moment produce a storm of protesting eloquence."[1]

Thompson's capacity for seeing the Divine Immanence in Nature was notably after St. Francis. In fact much of "the sublimated asceticism discoverable in St. Francis' Canticle to the Sun permeates Thompson's poems on this his favorite subject."[2]

St. Francis called the sun his brother, and the moon and stars his sisters because they belonged to his Father and theirs, God. Thompson, too, thought of these things almost as constantly as other people think of eating and sleeping.[3]

1. Allen, Hugh Anthony, op. cit., p. 295
2. Ibid., p. 297
3. Ibid., p. 297

Stars, birds, flowers and children,--especially children were a passion with him:

"Look for me in the nurseries of Heaven," he said.[1]

Constantly throughout his poetry we are carried to the Unseen, to that background of Franciscan thought wherein every material form justifies its existence by the recognition of "unity at the center of all things."[2]

When a respite came in the endurance of hardship Francis Thompson never forgot "the regions whose hedgerows were set to brick, whose soil is chilled to stone,"[3] but rather did all he could to alleviate the want of his less fortunate brethren. In so he derived much assistance from those "bearded counsellors of God,"[4] his fellow Tertiaries.

The deep respect and devotion which he had to St. Francis of Assisi may be summed up in the following lines:

> "The Assisian, who kept plighted faith to three,
> To Song, to Sanctitude and Poverty."
> (from To My Godchild)[5]

2. <u>St. Augustine</u>

That Francis Thompson's ideas on nature coincided exactly with St. Augustine's may be seen by considering a passage from the "Confessions" of the latter regarding external nature:

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 16
2. Spurgeon, Caroline, op. cit., p. 11
3. Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p. 263
4. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 15
5. Ibid., p. 9

"Yea, verily it speaks unto all, but they only understand it who compare that voice received from without with the truth within."[1]

In a poem entitled Motto and Invocation, Francis Thompson speaks of both St. Augustine and St. Francis:

"Lofty doctor, Augustine
Glorious penitent! And be
Assisi's Francis also mine!
(from Motto and Invocation)[2]

D. His category in relation to types of mystics

1. Composite of all types

Francis Thompson could well be said to be a composite of all the qualities and classifications embodying a mystic. We have seen that he kept his eye on the Vision and was fortified in so doing by the examples of the earliest mystics and those of the Medieval centuries. Although he lived in an era of materialism he was renunciatory of his own age and was the antithesis to worldliness. He was deeply spiritual and harkened back to the spirituality of the seventeenth century, for the strong soil of enraptured poetry was necessary for one who like Milton could peruse the Heavens and open to the soul the celestial harmonies.[3]

His attitude toward Nature was rather different from that of most of the nineteenth century poets who saw in her a guide

1. Pilkington, J. G., op. cit., p. 225
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 294
3. Silliard, A., "Francis Thompson," Westminster Review, April 1909, p. 431

as Wordsworth did, or a consolation and hope of Eternity as Keats did, or a refuge from the ills of life, after the manner of Coleridge. He did not make of Nature a religion because he had within him a more abiding Truth. He loved the earth and all its beauty but saw in it only the works of God:

"From sky to sod
The world's unfolded blossom smells of God."
(from From the Night of Forebeing)[1]

Like St. Augustine who said:

"Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our
hearts can find no rest outside of Thee,"[2]

Francis Thompson was convinced of the ephemerality of this life. His strong Catholicity is marked in this phase of his thinking. Being an ardent Catholic he was entirely conscious of the immortality of the soul. He therefore deemed the hereafter of much more consequence than existing life and considered our whole sojourn on this earth to be a complete and total preparation for eternity:--

"Life is a coquetry
Of Death, which wearies me,
Too sure
Of the amour;

A tiring-room where I
Death's divers garments try,
Till fit
Some fashion suit."
(from To The Dead Cardinal of Westminster)[3]

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 174
2. Pilkington, J. G., op. cit., p. 268
3. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 149

2. Outstanding mystical characteristics

There are certain qualities contained in Mysticism, which are so marked in Francis Thompson, that we enumerate them[1]:

a. Mysticism is practical not theoretical

Those whom we accept as mystics have lived the life and submitted to the ardour of the Mystic Way. They have not elevated their minds and hearts by only cogitating on the mystical experiences of others but have drawn apart living in this world but not of it. Thompson's own words will clarify the thought:

"Now, mortal-sonlike,
I thou hast suckled, Mother, I at last
Shall sustenant be to Thee. Here I untrammel,
Here I pluck loose the body's cerementing
And break the tomb of life; here I shake off
The bur o' the world, man's congregation shun,
And to the antique order of the dead
I take thy tongueless vows: my cell is set
Here in thy bosom; my little trouble is ended
In a little peace.
(from An Anthem of Earth)[2]

b. Mysticism is a Spiritual Activity

The true mystic accepts God without doubt or argument. In this stage of development towards God, through contemplation, he finally possesses Him. His eyes are set on Eternity, his whole being is permeated with this, and whatever be the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune they are of no account. They are offered up as a sacrifice or oblation:

1. Underhill, Evelyn, op. cit., p. 98
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 226

"Thereat a voice in me that voiceless was:--
'Whom seekest thou through the umarged arcane,
And not discern'st to thine own bosom prest?
I looked. My clasped arms athwart my breast
Framed the august embraces of the Cross."[1]
(from Desiderium Indesiderium)

c. The Business and Method of Mysticism is Love

Love in this sense is not the emotional, sensual love by which the term is frequently known but a deep, spiritual love of the soul for its Maker.

Francis Thompson felt that love between creatures could, if diverted through the proper channels, be used to draw human beings closer to God. Love in its highest and best sense has a tremendous tempering force because it entails much sacrifice. These sacrifices properly met and accepted make for greatness of character and soul. As he said:

"Love's the ambassador of loss."
(from To Olivia)[2]

And again in a tiny poem entitled Insentience:[3]

"O sweet is Love, and sweet is Luck
But is there any charm
When Luck from round the neck of Love
Drops her languid arm?

Weary, I no longer love,
Weary, no more luck;
O for a pang, that listless Lass
Might wake, and, with a playmate's voice,
Call the tired Love back!

To Thompson all Love was of a mystical nature. A love such as Dante had for Beatrice. In fact no poet since Dante

1. Ibid., p. 267
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., Ibid., p. 16
3. Ibid., p. 147

so transfigured the passion of human love with spiritual beauty and at the same time left it so convincingly human.[1] He expresses this thought in the following lines:

"Yet hast thou toward my vision taught
A way to draw in vernal thought,
Not all too far from that
Great Paradisial state,

Which for that earthy men might wrong,
Were't uttered in this earthless song,
Thou lay'st cold finger-tips
Upon my listed lips.

But thou, who knowest the hidden thing
Thou hast instructed me to sing,
Teach Love a way to be
A new Virginity!

Do thou with thy protecting hand
Shelter the flame thy breath has fanned,
Let my heart's reddest glow,
Be but as sun-flushed snow

And if they say that snow is cold,
O Chastity! must they be told
The hand that's chafed with snow
Takes on redoubled glow?"
(from Ad Castitatem)[2]

3. Other mystical qualities

Other mystical qualities he possessed could also be classified:[3]

i) His reverence for childhood. He saw something of the Divinity in little children.

"Therefore I kissed in thee
The heart of Childhood, so divine for me."
(from Sister Songs Part I)[4]

1. Cuthbert, Rev. R., A.S.C.F., "Francis Thompson," The Catholic World, January 1908, p. 485
2. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 192
3. Spurgeon, Caroline, op. cit., p. 149
4. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 98

ii) His attitude toward the beauty of woman.

It is entirely mystical and akin to the view of Plato. Woman's beauty is but a vehicle to catch sight of the beauty of the soul, which shines through and actually molds the face and body:

> "How should I guage what beauty is her dole,
> Who cannot see her countenance for her soul,"
> (from Her Portrait: Love in Dian's Lap)[1]

iii) His attraction toward the continual change in Nature, not only the movement of life to death, but death to life:

> "I in their delicate fellowship was one--
> Drew the bolt of Nature's secrecies."
> (from The Hound of Heaven)[2]

4. Consciousness of unity in all things

Over and above all the mystical characteristics the man possessed which would place him among the world's great mystics, stands out a quality which seems to leave a deeper impression than all the others, prevalent as they may be. This is his strict religious devotion. It comprises his intimate consciousness of the Divine Immanence and his undying belief that the world was created by God who sent His Only Begotten Son to redeem the fallen race of man.

> "By this, O Singer, know we if thou see.
> When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is here,
> When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is there,
> Believe them: yea, and this--then thou art seer,

1. Ibid., p. 71
2. Ibid., p. 79

When all thy crying clear
Is but: lo here! lo there!--ah me, lo everywhere!
(from Orient Ode)[1]

Miss Spurgeon in her most informative little book entitled, "Mysticism in English Literature"[2] defines a true mystic as "one who knows there is unity under diversity at the center of all existence, and he knows it by the most perfect of all tests for the person concerned, because he has felt it." What then of him who wrote:

"When to the new eyes of thee
All things by immortal power
Near or far
Hiddenly
To each other linked are,
Thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star?"
(from Mistress of Vision)[3]

E. His imagery

1. The metaphor

We feel that imagery as beautiful as may be found in the English language, may be discovered by those, who peruse the lines of Francis Thompson.

For a delicate, fragile treatment of the metaphor as used to describe Mrs. Meynell's poetic ability we point to:

"Upon the heavy blossom of her lips
Hangs the bee musing."
(from Her Portrait)[4]

2. Life about him used symbolically

1. Ibid., p. 169
2. Spurgeon, Caroline A., op. cit., p. 11
3. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 156
4. Ibid., p. 71

Thompson's undying devotion to childhood was always a source of inspiration to him and who would read The Making of Viola would be rewarded with a flow of ineffable imagery:

"The Father of Heaven
Spin, daughter Mary, spin
Twirl your wheel of silver din;
Spin daughter Mary, spin
Spin a tress for Viola.

Cast a star therein to drown,
Like a torch in cavern brown,
Sink a burning star to drown,
Whelmed the eyes of Viola."[1]

And again in "To My Godchild":

"If, while you keep the vigils of the night
For your wild tears make darkness all too bright,
Some lone orb through your lonely window peeps,
As it played lover over your sweet sleeps;
Think it a golden crevice in the sky,
Which I have pierced but to behold you by!"[2]

He was ever grateful for the rescue wrought in his behalf and was most expressive of it:

"As an Arab journeyeth
Through a sand of Ayaman
Lean, thirst, lolling its cracked tongue,
Lagging by his side along;
And a rust-winged Death
Grating its low flight before,
Casting ribbed shadows o'er
The blank desert, blank and tan:
He lifts by hap toward where the morning's roots are
His weary stare,----
Sees, although they plashless mutes are,
Set in silver air
Fountains of gelid shoots are,

1. Ibid., p. 11
2. Ibid., p. 15

Making the daylight fair;
Sees the palm and tamarind
Tangle the tresses of a phantom wind,----
A sight like innocence when one has sinned!"
(from Sister Songs Part II)[1]

"A sight like innocence when one has sinned!" No ordinary verse maker could have written this line. And we point to "A Poet Breaking Silence":[2]

"Ah! let the sweet birds of the Lord
With earth's waters make accord;
Teach how the crucifix may be
Carven from the laurel-tree,
Fruit of the Hesperides
Burnish take on Eden's-trees
The Muses' sacred grove be wet
With the red dew of Olivet,
And Sappho lay her burning brows
In white Cecilia's lap of snows!"

William Blake was one of the world's greatest mystics. He lived in a world of glory and vision and this to him was the real world. So profuse were his images that he could see a world in a grain of sand:[3]

"To see a World in a grain of sand,
And Heaven in a flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.
(from Auguries of Innocence)[4]

To him we match Francis Thompson who could behold a Jacob's ladder stretching from the prosy pavements of Charing Cross to the heights of Heaven:

1. Ibid., p. 36
2. Ibid., p. 59
3. White, Helen C., Mysticism of William Blake, p. 182

"But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry;--and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross."
(from The Kingdom of God)[1]

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 293

Chapter VI Selected Poems

Due to their wealth of imagery and profusion of symbolism the poems of Francis Thompson require careful reading. However, they do lend themselves readily to classification, as several distinct themes are found running consistently throughout both his prose and poetry. Most forceful of these are the poet's reaction to:

A. Nature

B. Evanescence of Life

C. Spiritual Love

D. Pain

E. Divine Immanence in all things

His works have been compared to those of Wordsworth and Shelley but we feel he does not need to be cataloged as a reflection of his nineteenth century predecessors. He has carved his own niche in English literature.

A. Nature

1. He is truly nineteenth century in his love of Nature but even here he differs from the trend of his times. He did not consider Nature to be an entity but rather a means to an end, and through this belief he has voiced some of his most forceful mystical lines. To him, the external beauties of the world, kept in proportion, were of great spiritual value.

There were many phases of Nature which proved a source of inspiration to him and the greatest of these was the sun. The Ode written in his honor bore the first evidence of poetic genius. He saw in the sun itself a symbol of Eternity and in its rising and setting, Christ's resurrection:

"If with exultant tread
Thou foot the eastern sea
Or like a golden bee
Sting the West to angry red,
Thou dost image, thou dost follow
That King-Maker of Creation,
Who, ere Hellas hailed Apollo,
Gave thee, angel-god, thy station;
Thou are of Him a type memorial.
Like to Him thou hang'st in dreadul pomp of blood.
Upon thy Western rood;
And his stained brow did vail like thine to night,
Yet lift once more Its light,
And risen, again departed from our ball,
But when It set on earth arose in Heaven."[1]

God working through the sun has given us the beauties of Nature:

"Who made the purple rose
Saturate with purple glows;
Cupped to the marge with beauty; a perfume press
Whence the wind vintages
Gushes of warmed fragrance richer far
Than all the flavorous ooze of Cyprus vats?
Lo, in yon vale which leaves her green cymar,
With dusky cheeks burnt red
She sways her heavy head,
Drunk with the must of her own odorousness;

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 88

While in a moted trouble the vexed gnats
Maze and vibrate, and tease the noontide hush.
Who girt dissolved lightnings in the grape?
Summered the opal with an Irised flush?
Is it not that thou dost the tulip drape
And huest the daffodilly,
Yet who hast snowed the lily?
And her frail sister whom the waters name
Dost vestal-vesture 'mid the blaze of June,
Cold as the new-sprung girlhood of the moon.
Ere Autumn's kiss sultry her cheek with flame?
Thou sway'st thy sceptered beam
O'er all delight and dream
Beauty is beautiful but in thy glance:
And like a jocund maid
In garland flowers arrayed
Before thy ark Earth keeps her sacred dance.[1]

It was in this same Ode to the Setting Sun he established faith in Christ:

"Yet, in this field where the Cross planted reigns,
I know not what strange passion bows my head,
To thee, Whose great command upon my veins
Proves thee a God for me, not dead, not dead!

For worship it is too incredulous,
For doubt--ah, too believing--passionate!
What wild divinity makes my heart thus
A fount of most baptismal tears?--Thy straight

Long beam lies steady on the Cross. Ah me!
What secret would thy radiant finger show?
Of thy bright master ship is this the key?
Is <u>this</u> thy secret then; and is it woe?

Fling from thine ear the burning curls, and hark
A song thou hast not heard in Northern day;
For Rome too daring, and for Greece too dark,
Sweet wild wings that pass, that pass away!"[2]

1. Ibid., p. 86
2. Ibid., p. 82

2. In Retrospect he sees in the sunset the symbol of the Crucifixion:

"And though the cry of stars
Give tongue before His Way
Goldenly, as I say,
And each from wide Saturnus to hot Mars
He calleth by its name,
Lest that its bright feet stray;
And thou have love of all,
But to thine own Sun's call
Thy path disorbed hast never wit to tame;
It profits not withal,
And my rede is but lame."[1]

3. In a Corymbus for Autumn we are given a beautiful interpretation of all Nature:[2]

"--------or higher, holier, saintlier when, as now,
All Nature sacerdotal seems and thou.
The calm hour strikes in yon golden gong,
In tones of floating and mellow light
A spreading summons to even-song.
See how there
The cowled Night
Kneels on the Eastern sanctuary-stair,
What is this feel of incense everywhere?
Slings it round folds of the blanch-amiced clouds,
Upwafted by the solemn thurifier,
The mighty Spirit unknown,
That swingeth the slow earth before the embannered Throne?
Or is't the Season under all these shrouds
Of light, and sense, and silence makes her known
A presence everywhere
An inarticulate prayer,
A hand on the soothed tresses of the air?
But there is one hour scant
Of this Titanian, primal liturgy,
As there is but one hour for me and thee,

1. Ibid., p. 199
2. Ibid., p. 99

Autumn, for thee and thine hierophant,
Of this grave-ending chant.
Round the earth still and stark
Heaven's death-lights kindle, yellow spark by spark,
Beneath the dreadful catafalque of the dark."

4. He continues, expressing man's relation to the universe in An Anthem of Earth. We put on the "fleshy lendlings" of Mother Earth and are forgetful of the obligations ensuing:

"In nescientness, in nescientness
Mother, we put these fleshy lendlings on
Thou yield'st to thy poor children; took
thy gift
Of life, which must, in all the after-days,
Be craved again with tears,----
With fresh and still petitionary tears.
Being once bound thine alms men for that gift
We are bound to beggary, nor our own can call.
The journal dole of customary life,
But after suit obsequious for't to thee.
Indeed this flesh, O Mother,
A beggar's gown, a client's badging
We find, which from thy hands we simply took,
Naught dreaming of the after penury,
In nescientness."[1]

He sings of the delight in Nature as Shelley might have done but with a deeper tone, realizing all the while that Nature exacts a toll:

"Then what wild Dionysia I, young Bacchanal
Danced in thy lap! Ah for thy gravity!
Then O, Earth, thou rang'st beneath me,
Rocked to Eastward, rocked to Westward,
Even with the shifted
Poise and footing of my thought!
I brake through thy doors of sunset,
Run before the hooves of sunrise,
Shook thy matron tresses down in fancies

1. Ibid., p. 217

Wild and wilful
As a poet's hand could twine them;
Caught in my fantasy's crystal chalice
The Bow, as its cataract colors
Plashed to thee downward;
Then when thy circuit swung to nightward,
Night the abhorred, night was a new dawning,
Celestial dawning
Over the ultimate marges of the soul;
Dusk grew turbulent with fire before me,
And like a windy arras waved with dreams.
Sleep I took not for my bedfellow,
Who could waken.
To a revel, an inexhaustible
Wassail of orgiac imageries
Then while I wore thy sore insignia
In a little joy, O Earth, in a little joy,
Loving thy beauty in all creatures born of thee,
Children, and the sweet-essenced body of women,
Feeling not yet upon my cheek thy foot,
But breathing warm of thee as infants breathe
New from their mother's morning bosom."[1]

Finally attaining maturity he realizes that neither Nature nor Man can be depended upon to shield us from the trials of Life.

------"She is not as we dreamed:
Ah me! we are beguiled!"[2]

5. The simplest forms of Nature were symbols of God's handiwork and afforded him inspiration. There is a delicacy in his treatment of A Field Flower, which is worth noting. It expresses deep spiritual insight:

"God took a fit of Paradise-wind,
A slip of coerule weather,
A thought as simple as Himself,
And ravelled them together.
Unto his eyes He held it there,
To teach it gazing debonair

1. Ibid., p. 218
2. Ibid., p. 219

With memory of what, perdie,
A God's young innocences were
His fingers pushed it through the sod--
It came up redolent of God
Garrulous of the eyes of God
To all the breezes near it;
Musical of the mouth of God
To all had ears to hear it,
Mystical with the mirth of God,
That glow-like did ensphere it."[1]

6. Likewise, there is an ethereal touch in To A Snowflake which is peculiarly Shelleyan; it contains a Christian point of view however, whereas Shelley's would have been pagan:

"What heart could have thought you?
Past our devisal
(O filigree petal!)
Fashioned so purely,
Fragilely, surely,
From what Paradisal
Imagineless metal,
Too costly for cost?
Who hammered you, wrought you?
From argentine vapor?--
'God was my shaper
Passing surmisal,
He hammered, he wrought me,
From curled silver vapor,
To lust of his mind:--
Thou could'st not have thought me!
So purely, so palely
Tinily, surely
Mightily, frailly
Insculped and embossed,
With his hammer of wind,
And his graver of frost.'"[2]

7. If there was nothing more to Thompson's poetry than beautiful imagery it would be cold and lifeless but as man's

1. Ibid., p. 277
2. Ibid., p. 278

soul is his animating force so is deep thought the force of poetry. The more sublime the thought the more sublime the poem. He reaches such a peak in Sister Songs in speaking of the immortality of the soul. He sings of the loftiness of a child's soul and the shackles which hamper the growth of the child's mind:

"Whose sex is in thy soul!
What think we of thy soul?
Which has no parts and cannot grow,
Unfurled not from an embryo
Born of full stature, lineal to control
And yet a pigmy's yoke must undergo.
Yet must keep pace and tarry, patient and kind,
With its unwilling scholar, the dull tardy mind,
Must be obsequious to the body's powers
Whose low lands mete its paths, set ope and close its ways;
Must do obeisance to the days
And wait the little pleasure of the hours,
Yea, ripe for kingship, yet must be
Captive in statued minority!
So is all power fulfilled, as soul in thee.
So still the ruler by the ruled take rule,
And wisdom weaves itself i' the loom o' the fool.
The splendent sun no splendor can display
Till on gross things he dash his broken ray
From cloud and tree and flower re-tossed in prismy spray."[1]

B. Evanescence of Life

While he sang long and deeply of Nature there is another theme which runs profusely through many of his poems. It is the evanescence of man's life. This truth presents itself again and again and proves conclusively that his early

1. Ibid., p. 38

Catholic training never forsook him even in the darkest days. He was as convinced of this truth as he was that night follows day.

1. This tenor and his interpretation of Nature run concurrently through the powerful Anthem of Earth:

> Ay, Mother! Mother!
> What is this Man, thy darling kissed and cuffed,
> Thou lustingly engender'st,
> To sweat and make his brag and rot,
> Crowned with all honor and all shame fullness?
> From nightly towers
> He dogs the secret footsteps of the heavens,
> Sifts in his hands the stars, weights them as gold-dust,
> And yet is he successive unto nothing
> But patrimony in a little mold,
> And entail of four planks. Thou hast made his mouth
> Avid of all dominion and all mightiness,
> All sorrow, all delight, all topless grandeurs,
> All beauty, and all starry majesties,
> And dim transtellar things;--even that it may,
> Filled in the end with a puff of dust
> Confess------"It is enough."[1]

We draw particular attention to this last line and its relation to the fact that Thompson read deeply of St. Augustine. In the Confessions of St. Augustine we find:

> "How then, do I seek a happy life, seeing that it is not mine till I can say, 'It is enough',[2] in the place where I ought to say it."

With his faculty of Vision he has full knowledge that death is not the end of life:

> "Not to the boy, although his eyes be pure
> As the prime snowdrop is

1. Ibid., p. 219
2. Pilkington, J. L., op. cit., p. 221

Ere the rash Phoebus breaks her cloister
Of sanctimonious snow;
Or winter fasting sole on the Himalay
Since those dove-nuncioed days
When Asia rose from bathing;
Not to such eyes,
Uneuphrasied with tears, the hierarchical
Vision lies unoccult, rank under rank
Through all create dawn-wheeling from the throne
Even to the bases of the pregnant ooze.
This is the enchantment, this the exaltation,
The all-compensating wonder,
Given to common things wild kindred
With the gold tesserate floors of Jove,
Linking such heights and such humilities
Hand in hand in ordinal dances,
That I do think my tread
Stirring the blossoms in the meadow-grass,
Flickers the unwithering stars."

2. The same theme is carried out in To the Dead Cardinal of Westminster. It is filled with the poignant idea of the fallacy of staking too much in the ever changing world.

"Life is a coquetry
Of Death, which wearies me,
Too sure
Of the amour,

A tiring-room where I
Death's divers garments try,
Till fit
Some fashion sit.

It seemeth me too much
I do rehearse for such
A mean
And single scene.

The sandy glass hence bear----
Antique remembrancer:
My veins
Do spare its pains.

1. Ibid., p. 92

With secret sympathy
My thoughts repeat in me
Infirm
The turn o' the worm.

Beneath my appointed sod;
The grave is in my blood;
I shake
To winds that take

Its grasses by the top;
The rains thereon that drop
Perturb
With drip acerb

My subtly answering soul;
The feet across its knoll
Do jar
Me from afar."[1]

3. He continues in the Mistress of Vision:[2]

"Pierce thy heart to find the key;
With thee take
Only what none else would keep;
Learn to dream when thou dost wake,
Learn to wake when thou dost sleep
Learn to water joy with tears
Learn from fears to vanquish fears,
To hope, for thou dar'st not despair,
Exult, for thou dar'st not grieve;
Plough thou the rock until it bear,
Know, for else thou could'st not believe
Lose, that the lost thou may'st receive;
Die, for none other way can'st live."

4. He knew that man, the greatest of God's creations, could overcome the emptiness of the world, and work out his salvation if he would but obey God's law. We point to Any Saint:

1. Ibid., p. 92
2. Ibid., p. 155

"Cosmic metonomy,
Weak world-unshuttering Key;
One
Seal of Solomon!

Trope that itself not scans
Its huge significance,
Which tries
Cherubic eyes!

Primer where the angels all
God's grammar spell in small,
Nor spell
The highest too well!

Point for the great descants
Of starry disputants,
Equation
Of creation.

Thou meaning, couldst thou see,
Of all which dafteth thee,
So plain
It mocks thy pain.

Stone of the Law indeed,
Thine own self couldst thou read,
Thy bliss
Within thee is."[1]

Thompson did not trust to luck in his attempt to overthrow the frivolities of life but set a true course to follow.

5. A few lines from Retrospect substantiate this:

"I trust in God most sweet.
Meantime the silent lip,
Meantime the climbing feet."[2]

C. Spiritual Love

Around the theme of Love, Thompson has written lines

1. Ibid., p. 184
2. Ibid., p. 199

that compare favorably with any ever written in the English language. He cherished the spiritual values of pure love.

1. Manus Animam Pinxit contains passages revealing the quality of mystical love:

> "Lady who hold'st on me dominion!
> Within your spirit's arms I stay me fast
> Against the fell
> Immitigate ravenings of the gates of hell;
> And claim my right in you, most hardly won,
> Of chaste fidelity upon the chaste:
> Hold me and hold by me, lest both should fall
> (O in high escalade high companion!)
> Even in the breach of Heaven's assaulted wall.
> Like to a wind-sown sapling grow I from
> The clift, Sweet, of your skyward-jetting soul,--
> Shook by all gusts that sweep it, overcome
> By all its clouds incumbent; O be true
> To your own soul, dearest, as my life to you!
> For if that soil grew sterile, then the whole
> Of me must shrivel, from the topmost shoot
> Of climbing poesy, and my life, killed through,
> Dry down and perish to the foodless root."[1]

Mere physical beauty is transitory but the beauty of a woman's soul is of vast importance and her countenance reflects her character, and grows more beautiful with age. He speaks of this in Her Portrait.

2. Her Portrait:

> "How can I guage what beauty is her dole;
> Who cannot see her countenance for soul;
> As birds see not the casement for the sky,
> And, as 'tis cheek they prove its presence by,
> I know not of her body till I find
> My flight debarred the heaven of her mind
> Hers is the face whence all should copied be,
> Did God make replicas of such as she;

1. Ibid., p. 60

Its presence felt by what it does abate,
Because the soul shines through tempered and
mitigate:
Where--as a figure labouring at night
Beside the body of a splendid light----
Dark Time works hidden by its luminousness;
And every line he labours to impress
Turns added beauty, like the veins that run
Athwart a leaf which hangs against the sun."[1]

3. The Night of Forebeing clinches the poet's idea of love:

"Love, that is child of Beauty and of Awe."[2]

4. The After Woman symbolizes his ideals of Christian love.

"For ended is the Mystery Play,
When Christ is life, and you the way;
When Egypt's spoils are Israel's right,
And Day fulfills the married arms of Night."[3]

5. Purity in love is essential and The Dread of Height emphasizes the fact:

"But ah! withal,
Some hold, some stay,
O difficult Joy, I pray
Some arms of thine,
Not only, only arms of mine!
Lest like a weary girl I fall
From clasping love so high,
And lacking thus thine arms, then may
Most hapless I
Turn utterly to love of basest rate;
For low they fall whose fall is from the sky."[4]

Continuing in the same poem:

1. Ibid., p. 71
2. Ibid., p. 174
3. Ibid., p. 196
4. Ibid., p. 162

"Yea, who me shall secure
But I, of height grown desperate,
Surcease my wing, and my lost fate
Be dashed from pure
To broken writhings in the shameful slime;
Lower than man, for I dreamed higher,
Thrust down by how much I aspire,
And damned with drink of immortality?
For such things be,
Yea, the lowest reach of reeky Hell
Is but made possible
By foreta'en breath of Heaven's austerest clime."[1]

D. Pain

As St. Francis of Assisi chose Poverty as the path leading to union with God, so Francis Thompson chose Pain for the same reason. Over and over again he sings of her.

1. From Laus Amara Doloris:

"O, inevadible Pain
Not faithless to my pact, I yield:--
'tis here,
That solitary and fair,
Thy most sweet, last and dear;
Swerv'st thou? Behold I swerve not;-
strike, nor spare!
Not my will shudders but my flesh,
In awful secrecy to hear
The wind of thy great treadings sweep afresh.
Athwart my face, and agitate my hair.
The ultimate unnerving dearness take,
The extreme right of abnegation make,
And sum in one all renderings were."

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

"Yet, yet ye few, to whom is given
This weak singing, I have learned
Ill the starry role of heaven,
Were this all that I discerned
Or of Poetry or of Pain.
Song! turn on thy hinge again!

1. Ibid., p. 162

Thine alternate panel showed,
Give the Ode a Palinode!
Pain, not thou an Ashtaroth,
Glutted with a bloody rite,
But the icy bath that doth
String the slack sinews loosened with delight.
O great key-bearer and keeper
Of the treasuries of God!
Wisdom's gifts are buried deeper
Than the arm of man can go!"[1]

2. His praise of pain and suffering has a deeply religious tone in Desiderium Indesideratum:

"O Gain that lurk'st ungained in all gain!
O love we just fall short of in all love!
O height that in all heights art still above!
O beauty that dost leave all beauty pain!
Thou unpossessed that mak'st possession vain,
See these strained arms which fright the simple air,
And say what ultimate fairness holds thee, Fair!
They girdle Heaven, and girdle Heaven in vain;
They shut and lo! but shut in their unrest.
There at a voice in me that voiceless was:--
'Whom seekest thou through the umarged arcane,
Am not discern'st to thine own bosom prest?'
I looked. My clasped arms athwart my breast
Framed the august embraces of the Cross."[2]

E. Divine Immanence in All Things

It is Thompson's capacity for seeing the Divine Immanence in all things that admits of his being placed with the world's greatest mystics. This quality, by the same token, distinguished him from the pantheists of the nineteenth century.

1. Ibid., p. 228
2. Ibid., p. 267

1. Perhaps no poem ever written has spoken so humbly and yet so forcefully of the omnipresence of God as does The Kingdom of God:

"O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee,

Does the fish soar to find the ocean?
The eagle plunge to find the air----
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars!--
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places;--
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
That miss the many-splendored thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry;--and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Ditched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry,--clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!"[1]

2. Carmen Genesis is redolent of God's presence in the world of creation:

"From light create, and the vexed ooze,
God shaped to potency and thews
All things we see, and all
Which lessen, beyond human mark,
Into the spaces Man calls dark
Because his day is small.

1. Ibid., p. 293

Far-storied, lanterned with the skies,
All nature, magic-palace-wise,
Did from the waters come.
The angelic singing-masons knew
How many centuries through
The awful courses clomb.

Then regent light his strong decree
Then laid upon the snarling sea;
Shook all its wallowing girth
The shaggy brute, and did (for wrath
Low bellowing in its chafed path)
Sullen disgust the Earth.

Meanwhile the universal light
Broke itself into bounds; and Night
and Day were twos yet one:
Dividual splendour did begin
As procreant task, and, globing, spin
In moon, and stars, and sun.
And, last, Man's self, the little world
Where was Creations's semblance furled,
Rose at the linking had:
For the first world, the moon and sun
Swung orbed. That human second one
Was dark, and waited God."[1]

1. Ibid., p. 189

Chapter VII The Hound of Heaven

The Hound of Heaven

"The Hound of Heaven"[1] has been called the greatest ode in the English language and this by no less a person than Mr. J. L. Garvin, the now well-known leader-writer in politics and literature. We could not do better than use Mr. Garvin's own words:

> "------when it became clear that the 'Hound of Heaven' and 'Sister Songs' should be read together as a strict lyrical sequence, there was no longer any comparison possible except the highest, the inevitable comparison with even Shakespeare's Sonnets. The Sonnets are the greatest soliloquy in literature. The 'Hound of Heaven' and 'Sister Songs' are the second greatest; and there is no third.
>
> We do not think we forget any of the splendid things of an English anthology when we say that to us, on the whole, the most powerful lyric in the English language. It fingers all the stops of the spirit, and we hear now a thrilling and dolorous note of doom and now the quiring of the spheres and now the very pipes of Pan, but under all the still sad music of humanity. It is a return of the nineteenth century to Thomas à Kempis.
>
> ----------The regal air, the prophetic ardors, apocylyptic vision, Mr. Thompson has them all."[2]

To all that Mr. Garvin has said we add that the poem has all the requisites to very definitely make it one of the greatest mystical odes in the language. It embodies a deep and clear insight into the realm of the Unknown. It is an

1. Ibid., p. 77
2. Garvin, J. L., The Bookman, March 1894, p. 164

account of the Divine Love of God for all men and the Divine Immanence in all things. These last mentioned truths were actually Thompson's credo and are of themselves the bases of all Christian mysticism. This Love of God for man is so overpowering and all-consuming as to be at times terrifying, but it cannot be evaded. Try as we might to seek escape in the various forms of life and nature this Love hunts us down and we finally surrender to its Divine Omnipotence.

The title of the poem is worthy of consideration. It is a daring title. Father Connolly suggests that in view of Thompson's fondness for Shelley it may have been suggested by a line from Prometheus Unbound, "Heaven's winged hound."[1]

Papini in his life of St. Augustine indicates that such a symbol was not unknown in the early church in Africa. The name of one of the faithful found in a Punic inscription is Kelbilium, which means, "hound of the divinity."[2]

The opening lines of the poem contain the story of the soul's flight and God's pursuit:

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
    Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
    Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after

1. Connolly, Terence L., Rev. S.J., op. cit., p. 350
2. Ibid., p. 350

But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat--and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet--
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

But the soul takes refuge in human love:

'I pleaded, outlaw-wise,
By many a hearted casement, curtained red,
Trellised with intertwining charities;
(For, though I knew His love who followed,
Yet was I sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.)
But, if one little casement parted wide
The gust of His approach would clash it to:
Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue.

In St. Augustine's Confessions he tells us of his appeal to Nature in seeking God:

"And what is this? I asked the earth, and it answered 'I am not He;' and whatsoever are therein made the same confession. I asked the sea and the deeps, and the creeping things that lived, and they replied, 'We are not thy God, seek higher than we.' I asked the breezy air, and the universal air with its inhabitants answered, 'Anaximenes was deceived, I am not God.' I asked the heavens, the sun, moon and stars: 'Neither,' say they, 'are we the God whom thou seekest.': And I answered unto all these things which stand about the door of my flesh, 'Ye have told me concerning my God, that ye are not He; tell me something about Him.' And with a loud voice they exclaimed, 'He made us.'"[1]

There is a strong similarity between St. Augustine's words and the thought conveyed in the following section:

1. Pilkington, J. L., op. cit., p.224

"Across the margent of the world I fled,
And troubled the gold gateways of the stars,
Smiting for shelter on their clanged bars;
Fretted to dulcet jars
And silvern chatter the pale ports o' the moon.
I said to Dawn: Be sudden--to Eve: Be soon;
With thy young skiey blossoms heap me over
From this tremenduous Lover--
Float thy vague veil about me, lest He see!
I tempted all his servitors, but to find
My own betrayal in their constancy,
In faith to Him their fickleness to me,
Their traitorous trueness, and their loyal deceit.

The soul would "cling to the whistling mane of every wind"--but in vain.

"Whether they swept, smoothly fleet,
The long savannahs of the blue;
Or whether, Thunder-driven,
They clanged his chariot 'thwart a heaven,
Plashy with flying lightnings round the spurn o' their feet:--
Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue.
Still with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
Came on the following Feet,
And a Voice above their beat--
'Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.'"

It next turned, as many a weary, disillusioned soul has done, to the innocent love of children:

"I turned to them wistfully"

But,

"Their angel plucked them from me by the hair."

In refuge,

"I sought no more that after which I strayed
In face of man or maid;
But still within the children's eyes
Seems something, something that replies,

They are for me, surely for me!
But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair
With dawning answers there,
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair.

Rebuked by the angel, it would in its flight be one of Nature's children and know all her secrets. It would know how the clouds arise and what controlled the sea:

"'Come then, ye other children, Nature's--share
With me (said I) 'your delicate fellowship;
Let me greet you lip to lip,
Let me twine with you caresses,
Wantoning
With our Lady-Mother's vagrant tresses,
Banqueting
With her in her wind-walled palace,
Underneath her azured dais,
Quaffing, as your taintless way is,
From a chalice
Lucent-weeping out of the day spring.
So it was done:
I in their delicate fellowship was one--
Drew the bolt of Nature's secrecies.
I knew all the swift importings
On the wilful face of skies;
I knew how the clouds arise
Spumed of the wild sea-snortings;
All that's born or dies
Rose and drooped with; made them shapers
Of mine own moods, or wailful or divine;
With them joyed and was bereaven.
I was heavy with the even,
When she lit her glimmering tapers
Round the day's dead sanctities.
I laughed in the morning's eyes.
I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,
Heaven and I wept together,
And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine;
Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
I laid my own to beat,
And share commingling heat;
But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart.

In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.
For ah! we know not what each other says,
These things and I; in sound I speak--
Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.

Even the possession of Earth's greatest secrets was inadequate:

"Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;
Let her if she would owe me,
Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me
The breasts o' her tenderness:
Never did any milk of hers once bless
My thirsting mouth.
Nigh and nigh draws the chase,
With unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy;
And past those noised Feet
A voice comes yet more fleet--
Lo! naught contents thee, who conten'st not Me."

Finally, utterly defenceless it considers surrender. Naked, the soul stands, stripped of all worldly affection; to be later clothed in the love of God:

"Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!
My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,
And smitten me to my knee;
I am defenceless utterly
I slept me thinks, and woke,
And, slowly gazing, find me stripped in sleep.

He feels that life has been wasted as he stands "amid the dust o' the mounded years:"

"In the rash lustihead of my young powers,
I shook the pillaring hours
And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,

I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years--
My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.
My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,
Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream.
Yea, faileth now even dream
The dreamer, and the lute the lutanist;
Even the linked fantasies, in whose blossomy twist
I swung the earth a trinket at my wrist,
Are yielding; cords of all too weak account
For earth with heavy griefs so overplussed.

Only the soul purified by the cleansing waters of suffering, is worthy of God's love. It is by suffering that we conquer:

"Ah! is this Thy love indeed
A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,
Suffering no flowers except its own to mount?
Ah! must--
Designer infinite!--
Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn
with it?
My freshness spent its wavering shower i' the
dust:
And now my heart is as a broken fount,
Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, split down ever
From the dank thoughts that shiver
Upon the sighful branches of my mind.
Such is--what is to be?
The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the rind?

The chase goes on and the battlements of eternity are partly seen through the mists of Time:

"I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds,
Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
From the hid battlements of Eternity;
Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
Round the half-glimpsed turrets slowly wash again,
But not ere him who summoneth
I first have seen, enwound
With glooming robes purpureal, cypress crowned;
His name I know, and what his trumpet saith.

Whether man's heart or life it be which yields
Thee harvest, must Thy harvest fields
Be dunged with rotten death?

The chase draws to a close and God's Love is the victor:

"Now of that long pursuit
Comes on at hand the bruit;
That Voice is round me like a bursting sea;
'And is thy earth so marred,
Shattered in shard on shard?
Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest
Me.

A great deal of man's internal suffering is the craving for love, and the failure to realize that only the love of God is all-satisfying:

"Strange, piteous futile thing!
Wherefore should any set thee love apart?
'Seeing none but I makes much of naught'
(He said),
And human love needs human meriting:
How much hast thou merited--
Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest
clot?
Alack! thou knowest not
How little worthy of any love thou art?
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
Save only Me, save only Me?

Love of nature and love of man while justifiable in themselves should not be substituted for love of God. Rather, they should be used as a means of acquiring greater love for God:

"All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in
My arms.

All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!"

The chase ends with all Life's sufferings found to be merely the shadow of the outstretched hand of Love, beckoning the soul ever onward and upward:

"Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."

Abstract

The nineteenth century in English history is one noted for being particularly revolutionary and materialistic.

The times were reflected in the literature and various schools of thought evolved from the upheaval of the period. Among these was the Pantheistic school which chose Nature as the pathway to stability. Following this, there developed the school of Romanticism and this in turn was superseded by the newer Realism.

In the midst of these various philosophies there was an occasional soul which remained untouched by the newer trends. The mystical way is oblivious to change. Such a person was Francis Thompson. Coming at the end of a period of transition he might have become a radical. To the contrary he ignored the entire social picture and was content to steep himself in mystical thought. The mode of life of the mystic is one of contemplation. It is a living act involving the perfect love of God and the establishment of a union with the Absolute. The method of arriving at such a state of spiritual perfection is by the deepest meditation, in which everything in the world, when disassociated from God, becomes mere dross.

For spiritual sustenance in his mystical mode of life--Francis Thompson eluded the unrest--spiritual and temporal--of his own times, and harkened back to the solidarity of the

early Christian and Medieval eras. By so doing he derived exceeding help and consolation from the early mystics, St. Augustine and St. Francis of Assisi.

His parents had destined that Thompson should be a priest and in accordance with their plans he was sent to a Catholic boarding school for boys. Certain obvious, inherent characteristics made it necessary for his superiors to inform his parents that it would not be wise for the boy to embrace the priesthood. A series of unfortunate incidents and misunderstandings, engendered by the bitter disappointment afforded both his parents and himself, necessitated his leaving home at an early age. The poverty and misfortune endured by him in London completely broke down his already frail health. Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred Meynell, who rescued him from his sorry plight, were quick to recognize his need of medical attention. They were directly responsible for preserving the poet because they saved the man by placing him in a hospital operated by the Franciscan monks.

In this way Thompson gained first hand knowledge of the "Seraph of Assisi," through the Order founded by the great Saint. He became thoroughly Franciscan in his philosophy and this is especially notable in his perfect Charity. So proficient did he become in bearing patiently the bitterest

trials of life that we cite him as embodying all the qualities of the world's greatest mystics.

He saw in all Love, Beauty, Nature, and Religion the shadow of God's love. He did not consider any of these elements entities in themselves but merely stepping stones by which we all might become closer identified with the Divinity.

Like all true mystics he wished to share his mystical experience, (the recognition of the Divine Immanence in all things) with others and his medium of expression in so doing, was poetry. Likewise, after the fashion of all true mystics, imagery and symbolism were the weapons used by him to define the Undefinable.

So adept was he in this method of expression that he has been hailed as a master in the use of the metaphor.

While he himself remained aloof from his own era, he <u>is</u> typically nineteenth century in his nature poems. For this reason he has been likened to Wordsworth and Shelley, both of whom he admired and with both of whom he shared the ability to probe Nature. His resemblance to them is strong, in his praises sung to spring, autumn, earth and the sun, but he is the antithesis of his great predecessors in their Pantheism.

The striking themes found flowing through his works are the evanescence of life, the necessity of spiritual love and

the Divine Immanence in all things.

His poetry was not well received in spite of the praise given it by the critic-masters of his own time Matthew Arnold, Coventry Patmore and J. L. Garvin. The lack of popularity of his work then and now is not surprising. What care would the peoples of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries have for mystical poetry? Poetry which sings of the emptiness of our lives and the necessity of spiritual love, would not be warmly welcomed in an age chronicled historically as being the ultimate in materialism.

Truths, involving suffering and sacrifice are painful in any age and are shunned.

To this poet goes the honour of having written one of the greatest odes, if not the greatest one in the English language. It is of sufficient magnitude to place him with the masters and carry his name triumphantly down through the ages until Time is no more.

For beauty, force, depth and spiritual insight the Hound of Heaven has no equal. This one poem alone, without relying on the magnificent support of Sister Songs, An Anthem of Earth, A Corymbus for Autumn or Ode To The Setting Sun, is sufficient to merit for the man the title we ascribed to him in the beginning of this thesis:

Francis Thompson: Poet of Mysticism

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